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To all you fans out there, the men and women for whom we spin these tales. Your dreams make these books real.

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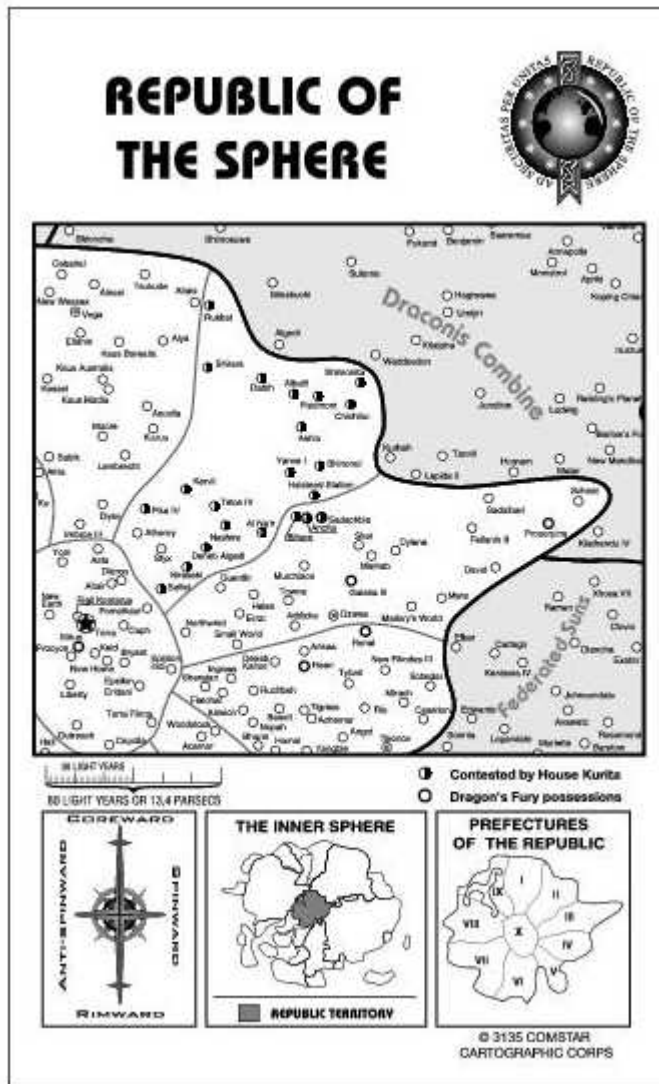
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Prologue

Devil's Rock

Prefecture VII, Republic of the Sphere

14 February 3134

Seven at night and still raining like hell in Faust City: a frigid rain, the near side of sleet, the kind that spiked a man's skin like an ice pick and burned like a brand. The kind of rain that made a man hope to hell he found a cheap dive and fast: a place with foggy windows and bored women with sagging breasts and pallid skin who bumped and ground through clouds of blue cigarette smoke swirling around their legs like gauzy fabric; a place where a guy could toss back a couple belts of cheap whiskey raw enough to knife his throat and explode in the pit of his stomach like napalm. A place like Lucifer's Pit.

C sat at a small, round table tucked into the far left corner, behind a pillar and in inky shadow. Anyone looking saw only a silhouette, but no one looked because everyone was too busy getting drunk, or stoned, or laid, or all three. C wasn't. He had a good view of the bar and the john was down a short hall to his right. He'd discovered a fundamental truth: You never drank beer; you only rented it. Other than boozey men weaving by to take a leak, no one frequented this little corner of the universe. That was fine

because C had a man to kill and tonight was as good a night as any. In fact, tonight was more than good. It was rainy, dark and colder than a witch's tit. Hell, it was perfect.

C hefted his mug, sucked in what passed for coffee, forced it down. The coffee tasted like it'd simmered since the early Pleistocene; a dank brew scummed with an amoeboid slick that shimmered suspiciously like engine oil and was sour enough to leave his mouth tasting like burned tar. He'd have preferred whiskey, but a good ISF agent didn't drink on the job—not and keep a clear head. Besides, there'd be plenty of time to celebrate when the Bounty Hunter was dead. Payback for all the Combine troops the Bounty Hunter had killed a year ago, and a long time coming.

C looked over the rim of his mug at his target, a man who sat eight meters to the right on a diagonal, and ringside to the runway where the dancers did their routines. The Bounty Hunter's disguise was pretty good: jowls, liver spots, a bottlebrush of thinning, white hair. The getup screamed civil servant slouching toward retirement: the kind of guy who got a watch and a handshake and was forgotten the moment he walked out the door. He wore rumpled khaki pants, a frumpish blue V-necked sweater and a pair of owlish steel-rimmed specs with thick lenses that gleamed white as coins in the light from the runway. But the thing that really sold the package? The limp. The Bounty Hunter lurched like an old man favoring a bad hip he should've replaced ten years ago.

Only the Bounty Hunter had buried himself in the part, inhabiting his role so well he'd developed habits, little routines more predictable than the sunrise. Like coming to the Pit every afternoon at five and staying until eight. What the Bounty Hunter saw in the bar was a mystery. There were enough people puffing away to fill a cancer ward. The Bounty Hunter didn't seem to be there for the girls, either, and his tip wasn't anything designed to endear him to the management (a half stone—big spender, but the coffee was pretty lousy). No, the Bounty Hunter just drank his two cups of coffee and read the paper. Then, every night at eight, he tucked the paper under his arm and limped out for home sweet home—a dingy apartment in a decrepit complex of narrow warrens and dead-end alleys a klick southeast of the sulfur refinery. Along the way he'd shell out a five-stone coin here and there and chat up one of the regulars, a down-on-his-luck drunk who squatted at the corner of the Bounty Hunter's apartment complex. And *bingo* : The idea came for just how, exactly, C might make the universe a better, brighter place.

Still, C was uneasy. He wasn't the first ISF agent to go after the Bounty Hunter. C was the third, and he had no illusions about being any better than his immediate predecessor, who'd been delivered, sliced and diced into a jigsaw, in a refrigerated box to ISF headquarters on Luthien three months ago. No one knew exactly what had gone wrong, and the dead guy sure wasn't talking. So C had to act on instinct, and instinct screamed that if he was going to make a move, he'd better do it tonight.

C's eyes dropped to his finger watch: a quarter to eight. Fifteen minutes was enough; he'd timed it that morning. Scraping back his chair, C stood, shrugged into his raincoat, backhanded a stone as a tip, and then wove his way toward the door and around tables, moving not too fast and not too slow and being careful not to avoid the Bounty Hunter's table, which lay on a direct line to the door. He passed so close, a quick glance over the man's shoulder let C catch a glimpse of the breathless headline: a follow-up story about that string of murders on Kordava in the suburb of Little Luthien nine months ago. So close C felt his pulse ramp in his temples and his stomach cramp with excitement—*one shot right behind his ear and, with the silencer, I'd get away before anyone noticed*—and then the moment was gone, and C was moving past the Bounty Hunter and pushing his way into the night.

The door clapped shut, cutting the sounds from the bar in two like a ribbon snipped by sharp scissors. C moved quickly now, grateful that it was still winter on this godforsaken planet. Night had slammed down hard; the rain had slacked but not ceased. The streets would be deserted, the traffic light. No witnesses. No one likely to interrupt C's little tête-à-tête with one very-soon-to-be-ex-Bounty Hunter.

Fifteen minutes later he was dripping wet, the rain trickling in shivery fingers down his neck and giving him the shakes as he turned onto the Bounty Hunter's street. The Bounty Hunter's apartment was in a red brick tenement, second building down on the right. The wind was blowing in from the west, flinging sheets of rain. The feeble glow from a solitary streetlamp threw out rain-fractured light, a wavering halo edged with a shimmering, rainbow-colored corona. The streetlamp stood at the near corner on the opposite side of the street: perfect, because that meant that anyone coming that way would lead with his shadow.

C armed wet out of his eyes and blinked. No one around, the rain washing the drunks away. Fantastic. C ducked into a narrow alley that was more pothole than asphalt. The alley was squalid with mushy garbage that squelched beneath C's boots and reeked enough to make him gag. But the alley was good because it was blind and windowless and, at the end, a bonus: an assortment of dented trash cans and one industrial-size rubbish bin.

All the better to dispose of unwanted Bounty Hunters, my dear.

If the Bounty Hunter was on schedule—and he would be on schedule—C had ten minutes. Quickly, he stooped, ran his fingers along the slimy bricks, then smeared muck through his hair and over his face. Then he stuck his pistol in his waistband and peeled out of his trench coat. He let the coat fall into a water-filled pothole, stomped on it a few times, then inched his arms into the now-soggy, filthy garment. He slipped the pistol back into the right pocket of his trench coat, cupping the stippled grip in his palm, his right index finger in the trigger guard. Lolloped back against the wall.

Ask for a handout and, while he's digging for change, that's when I shoot him—kill him and dump him in one of the bins.

The sounds were so indistinct and irregular, so textured by the hiss of rain on brick, he nearly missed them. Then his ears pricked to the hesitant tap of shoes against stone, one clap heavier than the other because the Bounty Hunter limped. C had to admire the man. He hadn't dropped the limp even to get in out of the rain. Nerves tingling, C waited, mouth dry, pulse tripping in his veins. Ten steps more, then five, and now he saw the bobbing black finger of a shadow through the fringe of his lashes.

Five steps more, then four, three . . . and as the Bounty Hunter came alongside, C hauled up his head, just another drunk dragging himself out of a stupor. "Say, buddy," he slurred and tottered forward a step to close the distance. "Say, buddy, can you . . .?"

There was the unmistakable *nick* of metal against metal, and the last thing C saw was something very bright, a steely arc. And then it didn't matter because, by the time his brain translated—*knife*—something cut across his neck, going right to left. There was a weird, pulsing, splashing sound, like water from a fountain hitting tile. C was too surprised to feel pain and he was just reaching for his throat when there was another flash, this time left to right, that sheared off the tips of his left fingers in the bargain. And then pain didn't matter because, suddenly, he couldn't breathe.

Choking, C clawed at his neck as his knees buckled and his vision grayed. His lungs burned, and the hiss of the rain got whispery-thin and delicate as fine mist. As C sagged, his last conscious thought was how the smell of his blood was like this wagon he'd had as a kid: a wagon left out in the rain one too many times, until it was pocked with rust blisters that smelled of wet copper. The smell of his blood was like that.

Theclick .

Theclick happened when he saw the ISF agent pretending to be a drunk pretending to hold up the wall of his apartment building. Then—*click*. A switch was thrown in some deep, dark crevice of his brain, and suddenly it was like his head had filled with helium. His mind drifted, his consciousness tethered to his body like a kid's balloon and he watched things unfold like a choreographed dance: the way he'd pivoted, snapping his right wrist. The way the knife darted like the razor-sharp tongue of a chameleon, uncoiling from its sheath beneath the cashmere sweater. The instant he'd felt that unmistakable transition as the knife sliced first air and then flesh. The agent's shock, then confusion and, finally, dull-eyed terror as the second cut sliced his windpipe. And blood, lots of blood, spurting in thick ropes that splattered to the asphalt and mingled with mud, a pulpy wad of discarded newsprint and the general garbage that sluiced down the gutters in a good, hard rain.

Then he *clicked* again, his mind collapsing like a pirate's spyglass. This was a good moment because he needn't hurry, and he could revel in sensation. His tongue sneaked over his lips. Something warm, brackish. Blood. He looked down at the cashmere sweater, purple now with blood and rain. Too bad; he'd liked the sweater. He particularly liked the way it smelled of its previous owner: pipe tobacco and spicy aftershave. Then he flicked his wrists; the agent's blood spun from the blades in teardrops. Another flick and each blade whirred into its hidden sheath, secured to his forearms beneath the old man's sweater.

What lovely toys. Pity that he and the Bounty Hunter couldn't have a little assassin-to-fellow-assassin chitchat. But the last he'd seen was the man's naked backside floating serenely downstream after he'd shucked the Hunter out of his armor—and, lordy, lordy, if the man hadn't been wearing a stitch except a pair of tatty boxers. Squatting, he studied the wisps of steam curling from cooling meat, the black blood a puddle drooling over concrete. Humming tunelessly, he withdrew a twelve-centimeter hunting knife from a sheath strapped to the small of his back and got to work. When he was done, he held the agent's dripping, bug-eyed head in his left hand. The agent's jaw was unhinged; his tongue lolled like a dead worm. On an impulse, he pressed his mouth to the agent's cold lips, his tongue playing over the hard, uneven edges of the agent's teeth, and discovered: The agent had an overbite.

"Alas, poor Yorick," he said, with a sigh and a wink. "I hardly knew ya."



Katana Tormark's Journal

Early morning, 1 October 3134

When I was eight, my father killed his best friend. When I turned fifteen, my mother died, and when I was seventeen, I told my father I never wanted to see him again. Ever. So he went away, and that was that. Sort of. For one thing, I lied; I kind of wish he'd stuck around. My mother was a musicologist, and after my parents separated—this was right after my father killed Uncle—we often went to the Combine. I met one of the most important people in my life there. And I learned a lot about the Combine. *A lot* a lot and I had questions for my father he could never answer.

At the same time I was, like, this poster child for The Republic: counseling little kids, getting my citizenship ahead of schedule, saving Sir Reginald, going to Northwind, becoming duchess and then

perfect while, at the same time, I'm studying *bushido*; I'm pretty damn good *atkendo kata*; I'm a better frigging samurai than my father and . . . you get the picture. The only thing missing is the holovid: *She fights! She conquers! She even cooks!* Like I'm some kind of new appliance.

Someone once said that, deep down in my gut, I must've known or figured out somehow that The Republic wasn't really my home, or I was never *at* home in The Republic in the first place; take your pick. Probably right on both counts. I mean, think about it: You got this Republic, and we're all supposed to love each other and not resort to violence and stuff. But here I am, kicking some serious butt—and getting rewarded for it. Schizophrenic, you ask me.

And here's another thing. As soon as that network went down, I finally saw how fragile the whole thing was. Factions and planets connected by a network of threads as insubstantial as a spider's web. One big blow and the web disintegrated, and all of a sudden, it's every woman for herself.

So why am I doing this? Beats me . . . no, that's a lie. I know why. I dream about it a lot, and sometimes memory and dream blur: a holovid caught in a continuous loop projected onto the blackness in my brain, and no off button.

Early summer's what I remember: the buzz of cicadas and the crunch of their husks under my feet. I'm eight; we're on Ancha, where I was born. I remember, or maybe I dream it—it's all the same—my mother and I had eaten dinner alone that night. My father, Akira, was gone on some business or other, and I knew that something was wrong. My mother played with her food, moving clumps of rice here and there with the points of her chopsticks the way I did when she made something I really hated. (Broiled squid was the worst; there was just something about those tentacles.) Afterward, she played her *shakuhachi*. Even though she wasn't a Combine citizen, my mother was crazy for all things Japanese. She was partial to the instrument because of *honkyoku*, Zen meditation music. My mother's been dead for almost twenty years, but I can still conjure up her hands, the milk-chocolate cast of her skin and long, slender fingers caressing the ancient bamboo flute. Her *shakuhachi* was lacquered red with urushi and cashew, with a lion done in black brushstroke, and *akanji* inscribed in delicate calligraphy that translated *tolion's heart*. When my mother played, you lost track of who played whom; whether the instrument coaxed sadness from my mother's heart, or she simply breathed sorrow. The Zen masters say that *shakuhachi* is music from the soul, and that's what I hear in my mind's ear: the sighing, mournful cry of a wounded heart.

Now the next part gets tricky because now the dream takes over, and I just don't know what's what.

First, I'm in bed. Dream or reality: I can't tell. My room is very dark, and I'm in the middle of that deep and dreamless sleep of childhood when something tugs me awake, reeling me to consciousness. I hear sounds. Quick. Angry.

Then a skip, like a faulty holovid. Now I'm moving toward a bar of yellow light cutting a diagonal into the darkness; now I'm peering into the kitchen where my parents *aren't* speaking. It's as if they're frozen in time but tiny and very far away, the way things look when you use the wrong end of a telescope. My father, tall and proud, in a coal black skinsuit, his swords nestled in a ruby red obi, and his black eyes glittering with determination, the strong line of his jaw firm and utterly implacable; and my mother, still as a statue, her brown eyes smoldering, the muscles of her neck as taut as the strings of a tightly strung *koto*.

And then I'm outside, as silent as a shadow. I can barely make out my father; he's like a creature scissored out of the fabric of night, as insubstantial as air. The air is just this side of chilly, and I'm shivering, gooseflesh stippling my arms. Gravel pricks the soles of my bare feet, and they hurt, and I wish

I'd remembered my sandals, or even a pair of socks.

Another skip: cool, dewy grass that shushes under my feet, like slippers on carpet, and the tall, straighter forms of trees. I'm crouching behind . . . a rock? A wall? My fingers skid over something cold and hard; my knees are damp with dew.

Ahead, there are men: all in black skinsuits, faces obscured, each with the twin swords of the samurai. I know my father by his silhouette: square, solid. Proud. But I also remember (dream?) two others standing to either side of my father. I don't know them, can't see their faces. Yet a finger of fear pokes my chest.

Danger! That's what my mind screams, and then a whispered afterthought: *Blood and enemies*.

The circle parts the way a curtain opens, and even though it's night, everything's clear as day. There, in the center, is a man in a loose white kimono. His silver hair's done in the elaborate *mitsu-ori* topknot of the ancient samurai, and I recognize him at once: Uncle Kan. Not really related, but my father's best friend; a man who followed Akira Tormark—OSP agent, lord, samurai—when my father left the Combine to pursue Devlin Stone's dream. Uncle Kan kneels on a black tatami, and he beckons the rest to sit, sit. They kneel, and then they eat rice and pickles from ceramic bowls. I know with absolute certainty that their chopsticks are anise, just as I know that each of the men has three slices of pickle on his rice, *mikire* : three portions. Cut skin.

There's a tray with a sake jug and one blue ceramic cup. My father carefully pours twice with his left hand from the left, filling Uncle Kan's cup, which Uncle drains in two sips twice done. Two plus two makes *shi* . Death.

Another skip: There's the *sambo* tray with Uncle Kan's *skazuka* , the blade wrapped in paper but leaving the last two centimeters bare. Uncle reaches for the tray; his kimono falls open; the *kazuka* is in his hand . . .

And then—he's cutting. No, not cutting. Slashing. Ripping. Grunting with the pain, the tip of his tongue clamped between white teeth. Left to right, unzipping his belly, and suddenly, there is black oil on his hands, his blade, his skin, his kimono. Only it's not oil; I know it's not oil. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. I'm frozen in time, and the dream—memory?—slows to that nightmarish pace where the monster's right behind, and you know that it's only a matter of time.

Somehow, Uncle's still conscious. Not screaming. Grunting, then hissing as his blade snags. My father stands at Uncle's left side, as his *kaishakunin* , long blade drawn. He's waiting for something, for Uncle to do something . . .

And then Uncle does it—jerks his *kazuka* free. Long, oily tongues of blood spill from Uncle's belly. I see it all: pearls of sweat beading his forehead and upper lip, his face twisted in agony. But still he says nothing. Instead, he replaces his *kazuka* on the *sambo* tray and nods. Once.

Quick as lightning, my father brings his blade up and then down: a whip of light slashing through darkness—and Uncle's neck. Two dark ropes of blood pulse in arcs; Uncle's head flops forward, lolling on his breast the way a marionette goes limp when its strings are cut. But it doesn't fall off. My father's been a superb *kaishakunin* , slicing through bone and muscle until Uncle's head is, literally, hanging by a thin flap of skin: the perfect *daki-kubi* .

And now . . . I scream. Loud. Long. Terrified. The men whirl; my father, horrified, blood dripping from

his blade, reaches for me. But I'm screaming, flinching away. "You killed Uncle Kan, you killed Uncle *Kan*!"

Here's what's weird. One of the two men who'd flanked my father peers at me strangely, head cocked like an inquisitive spaniel. His visored face is totally black, but I feel his eyes, hot as lasers, raking my body. And then he asks my father, "Is that her?"

Three simple words: Is. That. Her. Question mark. But what the hell did that mean? I didn't know then. I don't know now.

The rest is memory, a little hazy but real. My parents talking, clipped, terse sentences shot in rapid-fire staccato. Mother was angry; her skin feverish and pale. But my father wasn't. He was . . . sad. Not quite broken, but resigned. He laid Uncle's katana and *wakazashi* upon the table, and then he said something to my mother I've never forgotten: "Kan chose the wrong master."

Then my father reached down and touched my cheek; I remember that my cheek was wet with hot tears. I felt his rough, horny thumb on my skin, and I thought: *He's going away.*

And he did. I didn't see my father again until seven years had passed, when my mother died in a hovercar accident. By then, he was a stranger. We shared a house. I didn't even pretend that he was necessary; I could take care of myself, thanks. We never really talked. Instead, we argued, flinging words that stung like the quick, lightning strikes of a perfectly honed blade. Ours was a relationship that died from a thousand small wounds. Then, two years later, I turned the tables, and I left *him*. I didn't care what he did, where he went. Akira Tormark simply ceased being my concern—and now he's gone. Probably dead; my God, he'd be past ninety by now. So he's just like that dream now, a tissue-thin flap of memory like the flesh that held Uncle's head to his lifeless body. Nearly severed, but not quite.

Okay, fine. Maybe I'm crazy. But here's what I figured out. My father spent all his time extolling the virtues of The Republic, but when push came to shove? He went the way of the warrior—even if he tried to deny it with every fiber of his being.

And me? Hell, I don't know. The Republic's not my home, not really; and the coordinator is, what, indifferent? Incapable? I don't know. There's only silence, and that silence reminds me of that icy, hard, awful chasm between my parents, and my feeling that if I tried hard enough to please them, they'd stop, and we'd be a family again.

Whoa. I had to stop there, look away, then read that last bit again. What, I'm some snot-nosed kid demanding, "Notice me, notice me, I'm here?" I guess there are worse motives, but I'd kind of like to think there's more to it than that. But I'm on my course now, claiming worlds for the Dragon. People might think I'm nuts, tempting a power as awesome as the coordinator's.

And if Vincent Kurita demands my death? I'd do it. Gladly. Because then, *finally*, I'd belong. I'd be someone's daughter, not a ghost's or a memory's, but a real, flesh-and-blood daughter: a Daughter of the Dragon.



Benjamin Military District, Draconis Combine

1 October 3134

Katana Tormark.

Marcus wasn't sure what to do first: put his fist through a window, or murder his brother. Both were impossible. For one thing, the windows (or portals, or portholes, or whatever was JumpShip-speak) were triply-reinforced ferroglass, virtually indestructible. For another, infinitely more important reason, Jonathan was much more likely to kill *him* first, not because Jonathan was necessarily stronger or more cunning but because Jonathan had legs that worked and a lot more practice. So what Marcus did instead was turn aside and stare out at all that deadly, silent, beautiful space.

From the outside, his personal JumpShip looked like any other *Magellan*-class vessel: a stout tube with a bulbous nose collared with six capsule-shaped fuel tanks. Nothing special. (Unless you figured in the windows: they cost. Marcus was nearly as wealthy as Jacob Bannson, but while Bannson's billions funded his quest for the holy grail of respectability, Marcus bought the thing that revenge demanded: discretion.)

Inside, the *Omega* screamed wealth. Besides the lack of a grav deck—something Marcus missed not at all—and the addition of an onboard medical facility (sadly, a necessity), the ship was a lavishly appointed home stretched end to end and all around. There were computer workstations positioned at desks along the “floor” and illuminated by specialized full-spectrum UV-blocked lights from “above.” There were rich, handwoven Shirara rugs on grippads; teak and cherrywood furniture bolted to the deck; beds sheathed in satin. Marcus even had a real library: actual leather-bound books with marbled edges and gilt lettering. Worth more than their weight in platinum, the books were held in place by specially made retention belts, and Marcus spent hours reveling in the sensation of cool, smooth leather. And there was ferroglass, whole sections given over to elegant, transparent curves that gleamed with a buttery yellow incandescence, or displayed millions of hard, diamond-bright stars glittering like sequins sewn onto black velvet.

Now Marcus stared out, and his reflection stared back. Space had been kind to him even if life had not. At fifty-four, he still possessed a lean, wolfish face with high cheekbones and sable-colored eyes that took off ten years. He wore his camel-colored hair military short. Weightless the majority of the time, he'd escaped gravity's fingers, the way they dragged through the putty of a man's face. His shoulders were broad, his arms bunched with cords of muscle, his abdomen washboard flat, and his hands powerful enough to crush walnuts.

But if space had been good to Marcus, time had been better to Jonathan. Marcus' moody gaze slid to the reflection of his younger brother floating with infuriating nonchalance on the other side of the room. Jonathan was more than handsome. He was beautiful. Sensuous lips, a lush mane of black hair shot through with silver that might look ridiculous in zero-g but cascaded in silken rivers under gravity, and a pair of hooded, smoke-gray eyes that suggested the pleasures of the bedroom. Even before the accident, Jonathan was a quarter meter taller and had a leopard's sinewy grace.

Marcus scowled. “Why do you insist on taking risks?”

“Because I can.” Sighing, his brother unfurled like a cat working out the kinks. “Where's the sport in a fast kill?”

“Sport,” Marcus grunted. Pushing off from the window, he twisted left, hooked his left hand into a

handhold strategically located just shy of the curve of the room's "ceiling." His scrawny, paralyzed legs drifted behind like wind socks snatched by a weak breeze. "This isn't a game, Jonathan. Katana Tormark must die. Getting rid of the Bounty Hunter was a necessity; we needed to put you in her camp. But toying with ISF agents, that business on Towne . . ."

"Not*business* ." Jonathan peered through his lashes. "Practice."

"Eight murders seems excessive."

"Nine. Shu's daughter was a bonus."

"She wasn't a bonus. Shu just didn't know how to finish what he'd started."

"Oh, don't be such a spoilsport, Marcus. You're just angry because you couldn't do the little twat yourself."

"That's beside the point."

"Really," Jonathan drawled. "So why did you insist I record them? Don't tell me you haven't enjoyed those data crystals. You think you're the only one who knows how to access a computer and see who's been listening to what?"

"Jonathan," Marcus began, then stopped, mortified. What Jonathan said was true. Listening to the women plead for their lives, promise to do*anything* for Jonathan, and then watching, mesmerized, as they*did* . . . even thinking about them made Marcus' pulse jackhammer in his veins, his mouth go dry. Marcus was fabulously wealthy, yes, but he needed his brother to be his eyes, his ears. His body and the women . . .

"That's not the issue," he managed tersely. "You can't go around . . . *recruiting* people on a whim, then going on a little spree."

"And why not? What's a little murder between friends?"

"Shu wasn't your friend."

"No," said Jonathan, frowning in mock solemnity. "You've got a point there. He was just in love with me. But*what* a stroke of luck, eh? Stumbling onto Shu and his lovely daughter during one of their naughty little games . . . the poor girl was half-dead by the time I cut that scarf." Grinning, he tucked, rolled, then planted his feet against a slim bulkhead and shot across the room, sailing for a high corner. There he wedged: a human spider at the center of an invisible web. "You know, I'm beginning to understand what you see in zerog . Sex must be quite the experience."

"Don't change the subject,"

"Spoilsport." Then Jonathan sighed. "I had to give the police*someone*, and dear little Shu was so eager. It was like having a cocker spaniel."

"He was inept. What about that girl he let run off?"

Jonathan tsk-tsked. "Yes, well. Everyone's nervous the first time. But if I told him once, I told him a thousand times: No, Shu dear, you cut out their tongues*after* they're dead."

“This isn’t funny.”

“I never said it was. I have to admit that when those idiot police only wounded and didn’t *kill* him, I had a nervous moment or two. Very obliging of him to die in hospital.” Jonathan dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Actually, between you and me? Shu was on the mend, going to regain consciousness any second, that was the gossip amongst the nurses, and I thought, well, *that* won’t do. So I slipped a little something into his intravenous, a tiny bit of succinylcholine. Paralyzed his diaphragm just like that.”

Marcus jabbed a finger at his brother. “And that’s what I’m talking about. You poison the son of a bitch, and then you think that the police won’t come looking?”

“Succinylcholine is virtually untraceable. I know what I’m doing.” Jonathan screwed up his features the way a petulant child wrinkles his nose at lima beans. “You think it’s easy imitating a good serial killer? Dreaming up a novel signature took me a week. There were so many details, like remembering that blood spatters in—”

“I heard the news feeds. In fact, I couldn’t find anything *but* for weeks. But here’s what I don’t understand. You plant clues. You lead the police on this wild goose chase before remembering that, oh, yes, there’s this government official I’ve been sent to assassinate—for which I’m being well *paid*, thank you very much. You even give yourself a damn name!”

“Well, I didn’t like the one *they* chose.” Jonathan folded his arms and dropped into a cross-legged squat, like a sultan on a flying carpet. “Little Luthien. Sounded like a troll living under a bridge.”

“But *Kappa*? Why not just take out an advertisement? Better yet, why not send the ISF an itinerary?”

“Marcus, Marcus,” Jonathan sighed, wagging his head from side to side as if his brother were a dull little boy who just didn’t get it. “Don’t you understand? It’s only an advertisement for the prepared *mind*. I *wanted* the ISF to sit up and take notice.”

“Oh, they noticed all right. Sent an agent out to assassinate you.”

“My point, exactly: Three little agents, all in a row, one on Northwind, one on Procyon,” said Jonathan, ticking the planets off on his fingers, “and the last on Devil’s Rock, all in a nice straight line leading right into Prefecture VII. Let the ISF and Bhatia spin their rotors a bit, maybe send a few agents to Castor or Connaught. It’s immaterial, really, so long as they’re looking in one direction while I go another. Anyway, things are going quite well. Getting rid of the Bounty Hunter was inspired, if I do say so myself. What better way to infiltrate Katana’s camp than by assuming the identity of a man no one’s ever seen face-to-face?”

Marcus wasn’t ready to let go of things quite so easily. “I’m not sure I’d call Devil’s Rock working out well. That agent got too close.”

“*Let* him get close. It was fun watching *him* watching *me*. Besides, I wanted to try out my new toys.” Jonathan paddled over to where Marcus still hung, fuming. “Stop fretting, Marcus. You worry too much.”

“Because there’s a lot to worry about.”

“No, there isn’t. Everything’s under control.”

Marcus didn’t answer because things weren’t under control anymore, and Marcus knew it. Oh, it wasn’t that he worried they’d be caught. Jonathan *was* good, *very* good. The problem was . . . Marcus wasn’t sure he could control Jonathan.

Their objective was clear: Katana Tormark must die. But would Jonathan do the job? Marcus stared into Jonathan’s eyes, gray as storm clouds and hard as flint, and saw something he didn’t like. There was an odd gleam, as if Jonathan really *was* *Kappa* : not the code name he’d taken but the actual monster, a creature from ancient Japanese mythology; a chimera of monkey, frog, turtle and human. According to legend, *akappa* drew strength from water set in a bowl-like depression atop its head. The ancient Japanese had been so terrified of *kappas* that they’d developed the ritual bow—a way of getting a kappa to tip its water and lose its powers.

And *kappas* were arrogant, sometimes fatally so. *Kappa no kawa nagare* , the saying went: Even a kappa can drown.

But Marcus didn’t say any of this. There were things you didn’t say to Jonathan, not when you caught that glint of something else beneath his skin and behind his eyes—not if you wanted to continue to enjoy what was left of your life.

So Marcus said the only thing he could. “You know best. Where to next?”

Jonathan’s lips peeled back: not quite a grin and just short of a snarl. “Junction. And after that? Whichever way the wind—and Katana—blows.”

Well, now. Marcus *might* be a problem.

It was nearly midnight ship’s time, a time when Jonathan did some of his best thinking. So, as he peeled out of his clothes, he decided it was high time to do some heavy-duty thinking right now—about Marcus.

Naked now, cool air drawing sensual fingers along his skin, Jonathan hovered over his bed, inspecting his toys. He always stripped when he took inventory. He couldn’t explain it, but handling certain pieces made him, well, warm and tingly all over. His hungry eyes roved over makeup, syringes of silicon to change his features, contacts for his eyes, and his lovely, wonderful weapons: detonators, flechettes, an assortment of pistols, the ever-popular needler, frangible explosives.

But his eyes settled upon the Bounty Hunter’s gravity knives. Jonathan’s long, slim fingers trailed over the cool metal of the weapons’ shafts, and a frisson of pleasure shivered up his back and made his skin sprout gooseflesh. On an impulse, he strapped on the knives, cinching the leather straps tight. There was a full-length mirror opposite his bed, and now he pirouetted in midair, turning slowly on an invisible dais, his black mane of shoulder-length hair undulating like sea fans, the muscles of his arms and legs smooth as water-worn boulders beneath skin tawny from the sun. His body was a tool he kept in peak condition.

Gravity knives were simple in theory. Deploying the blade required a quick extension of the wrist, which depressed a hidden spring. Jonathan flicked both wrists. There was a metallic *nick* then a whisper of metal against metal as the knives extended. He admired the effect in the mirror, the way the razor-sharp blades caught the light.

Wonderful gadgets, and *thearmor!* He inspected the bright, neon green suit spread on his bed: helmet, segmented chest plates, bulky vambraces with their arcane shape, gauntlets, upper leg armor and cylindrical boots. Relics, every article already a piece of history when, over a century ago, Michi Noketsuna appeared on Deber City and nearly killed heir-apparent Theodore Kurita. Michi was dead now, of course, but the Bounty Hunter had existed before him, and lived on after: a moniker assumed by anyone with a grudge and the gumption to assassinate his predecessor. So who, exactly, had this incarnation of the Hunter, this Michi Fraser, if that was really the man's name, been? Well, water under the bridge, or down the river: the secret had died with the man. A pity he'd never find out now, but Jonathan had his own accounts to balance in the universe's Grand Cosmic Ledger: with one Katana Tormark to be exact. Only, lately, setting his sights *just* on Katana was feeling somehow, well, *limiting*, and Jonathan didn't like limits.

He retracted the blades, tucked and rolled to a computer. Riffling through an assortment of data crystals, he popped one into his holovid and pressed <play>. The machine hummed. . . .

Sounds. A door opening, closing. The whimpering of an animal, a dog perhaps, muffled by cloth. A faint ripping sound—and then quick, breathless moans.

Spellbound, Jonathan listened as the woman's cries became wave upon wave of screams, then shrieks, then gabbled pleas for mercy and God—and then for death that couldn't come quickly enough. How good it was, the terror in their eyes and then the way they heaved and bucked as he strangled the life out of them, or slowly carved out small chunks of meat while Shu watched . . . Jonathan shivered again with a growing excitement that sent heat licking into his loins. He'd told Shu: The trick was to make the women last so the pleasure could go on and on, like pulling a fly's wings and legs off, one at a time.

Would Katana Tormark scream? Would she beg? He liked to think that she wouldn't at first because then, well, he'd *make* her. Then he'd be like a god.

Jonathan listened, his skin prickling with pleasure, his lungs pulling in air in huge, sobbing pants, and then he thought: *No, no, not like a god because . . . I am God.*



Orange Flight, 5th Tactical Fighter Squadron, 276th Tactical Fighter Wing

Ogawa City, Tsukude

Prefecture I, Republic of the Sphere

28 November 3134

Two undeniable facts: The universe could kill a guy a thousand ways to Sunday, and what the universe couldn't do, the Dracs were pleased as punch to finish.

Now, his onboard sensors shrilled a warning about five milliseconds before Lieutenant Adrian Penn's *Lucifer* hit another pocket of turbulence. *Oh, yeah, baby, bring it on; peg that old fun meter one more time*. Penn's altitude dropped, and his stomach balled in his throat. Penn wrestled his bird, angled off fifty degrees, and then let out a slow exhalation when he felt the fighter lift.

Static sizzled in his headset: “Whoa, shake and bake.”

Penn grinned past the acid taste in his mouth. “A chance to excel, Menace.”

“Uh-huh,” said Menace, aka Brad Dennis, Penn’s Dash Two for what seemed like a million years and was closer to seven. “Punches my ticket.”

Penn grunted. A week ago, Central Command’s systems’ boards had lit up like a Christmas tree when the Drac JumpShip winked in at the nadir jump point. Count ’em, boys and girls, numero uno JumpShiperino. That mother coughed out a DropShip, the sphere blowing free like a spit wad shot out from a straw, and Command got all kinds of beaded up. To top it all, the sun burped, big time, and with all that superheated plasma gumming up the works, all Command could figure was that the DropShip had closed on the planet, then deployed four aerospace fighters. Going where? Who knew? Some brainiac crunched numbers, figured that fighters (plural) would hit Tsukude’s ionosphere roundabout twelve hundred over Ogawa City—he guessed.

The preflight briefing came at oh-nine-thirty. A dour commander reminded them of everything they *didn’t* know. “But whatever happens, one thing’s crystal, boys and girls. You will not fire unless fired upon.”

Terrific; an aerial quick draw. But Penn didn’t say anything, just suited up with his flight—Menace; red-haired Pattie “Red” McAllister; and Samantha “Power” Will—and blasted out of there. The upside: They had *Lucifers* and could take on a medium-size DropShip, push came to shove. The downside? *Lucifers* packed muscle, but they were slower than molasses in an atmosphere; hence, the decision to engage the enemy in the upper reaches of the atmosphere where gravity didn’t count as much, and there was enough ionized crap to hide their signatures. (And, oh, yes, had Penn mentioned that, in a *Lucifer*, a guy couldn’t eject? Well, he couldn’t eject. *Sweet*.)

Penn’s *Lucifer* knifed through shimmering curtains of multicolored auroras that were shet-mah-mouth beautiful, and a bitch to maneuver through. Orange Flight was way up high: angels fourteen-hundred-and-change above the floor. They flew a classic box: Penn and Dennis in front of McAllister and Will by six kilometers; Dennis two-point-seven-four clicks behind and point-three-oh-four-eight clicks above Penn’s right side; Will the same for McAllister. It was Penn’s job to search and report, Dennis’ to watch his tail, and as Dash Four, Will’s to make like her neck was on ball bearings and cover *all* their collective butts.

Suddenly, his computer blatted. Penn snapped to, felt his heart kick up, said, “Tangerine One has two, repeat *two* contacts, forty right, angels sixteen-four.”

An instant later, Red McAllister’s voice filtered in a wash of static. “Tangerine Three confirms same. Read two bogies, forty degrees right, altitude now sixteen-three.” A pause. “Confirm two, green for go.”

Menace: “So where the hell are the *other* two?”

Good question. Penn chewed the inside of his right cheek. Two unidentified fighters, angling down from sixteen-thousand clicks and change—and *green*: not acquiring, not even hot. And two Dracs missing. Headed somewhere else? Or hiding in all that plasma soup, waiting for a chance to slip in at their six o’clock?

Evidently the strike controller ticked through the same calculus because there was a squall of interference, and the words: “. . . change . . . eading . . . atch . . . and speed . . . do . . . engage . . . conflict.”

Lord, help me. “Control, this is Tangerine One, say again.” More fuzz and urps, though Penn caught *deconflict* .

“Ho, boy,” said Menace. “I don’t frigging likethat .”

Penn didn’t either. *Deconflict* . Translation: Wait until *Command* decided these were the bad guys. But he said, “Roger, Control, Penn Thirty-seventy.”

Penn watched as the bogies remained to his right, forty degrees off the horizontal, but shedding altitude: fifteen-six . . . fifteen-one . . . fourteen-nine. Then he made a decision. *And screw Command*. “Tangerine One flight, check forty right.”

No one pointed out that Penn’s order turned them *toward* the Dracs instead of away. But they were too far away to answer that old bogie-bandit question, so, by God, they’d get closer. They executed hard rights, Menace’s turn putting him five hundred klicks ahead of Penn. Throttling down, Menace angled up to cover Penn’s rear. Penn stayed glued to his HUD as the bogies squiggled, resolved, metamorphosed into . . . *Oh, hell* . Just to be sure, he blinked, double-checked his IFF, said, “Tangerine One is tallyho *two* , repeat *two* bandits, zero, nine-point-six klicks.”

“Two?” Menace again. And then: “Uh-oh.”

Now Penn saw it, too. First there were two *Sholagars* . And then there were four. Fanning out from their flight-mates’ electromagnetic shadows, two additional *Sholagars* fell into a diamond formation—coming right for them and closing fast.

A second later, Red: “Tangerine Three is tallyho four bandits, nine-point-two klicks and closing. ID Friend or Foe confirms *Sholagars* . Confirm, Control.”

Red was cool; he had to give her that. Penn watched as the pings streaked right for them. *Suckers got the speed of heat and can turn on a dime, so it’d be like a knife fight in a phone booth, and, yeah, we outgun them, but they can evade, so where’s the sense in that . . .*

Three seconds went by, then ten. Penn rekeyed for Control: “Tangerine One is tallyho four bandits, eight-point-six klicks. Request confirmation.”

His answer was a hiss followed by a pop, and something that sounded like a man gargling underwater. And that was the extent of his contact with strike control. Then his HUD flared, and Penn looked. Looked again. Cursed.

Menace: “Tangerine Two, read bandits, coming in hot!”

Hot. The *Sholagars* were targeting, and Penn’d bet his bottom stone note the Dracs wouldn’t wait around for them to take their shots. *Unless we shoot first* . Penn’s thumb searched out his laser override switch, one o’clock on his throttle . . . and hesitated as a new thought bubbled to the surface: *But what if . . .* “Red, Power, throttle up, assume four at forty-five, two-point-seven klicks, go hot.”

No one argued; everyone did as the lead pilot said and in ten seconds McAllister and Will had caught up to assume positions right and left of his wing as Menace dropped back and shed altitude. Penn nudged his speed to put on some distance until they were configured in a flat, elongated diamond, Penn in the lead. And they were hot.

Now it was a test of nerves and speed. Yes, the *Sholagars*' turn radius was tighter. Only *his* guys had superior weaponry, so one of two things would happen. Either each would break off and start turning, hard, cutting their turns and threading their fighters across ever-narrowing loops until one slid in to their opponent's rear and took his shot. Or they'd get a knife fight in the cold, hard, darkness of space: Dueling fighters scissoring nose-to-nose, back and forth in sheer, fast vertical or horizontal turns, like knitting needles crossing, uncrossing, crossing, until one fighter got inside the other's turn, slid in behind, and let 'er rip. And gravity didn't count for a damn in space because a fighter never ran out of vertical velocity. Problem was the *Sholagars* could run circles around them, and the last thing Penn'd see would be a laser chewing its way up his ass. *Unless . . .* he got very, very lucky.

"Penn!" Red, her voice ratcheted way up tight. "VID bandits, closing!"

And now Penn had visual ID, too: four black specks that grew from the size of mites to ball bearings, and then resolved into stippled disks, and now he could see their contrails. *Come on, come on*. Penn watched as his HUD tracked the incoming *Sholagars*, responding with automatic targeting information continuously updated for course and speed. His throat was dry, the stuffy air in his mask smelled like mildewed rubber and sweat slithered down the knobs of his spine. *Come on, you gotta know I'm hot, you gotta see it; so come on, you bad boys, show me what you got*. The disks growing larger and larger, Tsukude's crazy sun dancing bright sparkles that bounced off the *Sholagars*' hulls, turning their canopies a molten orange . . . larger and larger, and the four *Sholagars* screaming full-bore. A game of chicken: Penn had to break at the last possible second, praying like hell that the lead Drac would break first so he'd catch which way the lead *Sholagar*'s nose went, up or down. And *that* would work to Penn's advantage because *then* he'd know where the sonuvabitch was headed and match him turn for turn until he maneuvered into the Drac's killing zone.

Except . . . the *Sholagars* weren't breaking. *Would you look at how tight they are; they're practically on top of each other; they've got to be inside each other's wakes and in all that plasma that would . . .* Penn gasped. *Plasma in their wake! Oh, shit, shit!* "Break, break, *break!*" Penn screamed—too late.

His collision alarms shrilled as the *Sholagars* rocketed through, cracking Penn's flight wide open and dragging their real and *best* weapon: a roiling, churning cone of supercharged, ionized plasma.

Penn caught one brief glimpse of the lead *Sholagar*—a flash of red and black—before his *Lucifer* slammed into the vortex of plasma. His fighter lurched and bucked, skipping like a flat stone on a pond. He ricocheted off an instrument panel hard enough to send pain lancing into his skull. The taste of wet pennies filled his mouth, and he gagged against hot blood.

Then, a woman screaming, a long rope of sound abruptly cut as Red's *Lucifer*, out of control, burst in an orange fireball. Penn barely had time to register *that* when his collision alarms shrilled again. Menace's *Lucifer* closing *too damn* fast. Screaming, Penn yanked back on his stick, forcing his nose up, up, *up*; his mind racing: *Maybe I've outrun it, maybe the worst is over, maybe it's still okay, maybe . . .*

Then there were no more maybes. Turbulence roared in like a tidal wave, smacking his fighter's belly, forcing him not up but *over* in an arcing loop, and then Penn was barreling straight down, nose-first, with the speed of a fighter kicked into overdrive. Out of control; he was out of *control*! Penn registered Menace dead ahead, the way Menace's wings waggled, knew that Menace was battling his craft; saw the Republic blue of Menace's helmet, then Menace's black visor as he looked up and saw Penn.

"No!" Penn screamed, and then he went against all that was holy. Instead of easing off, he *pushed* his

speed, kick-jumping and throttling up before jerking his fighter in a hard left, splitting air and breaking wide of Menace's fighter by a hair's breadth. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Menace careering past, Menace's *Lucifer* twirling along its horizontal axis, out of control.

Then his alarms screamed again, and Penn's heart banged into his throat. Frantic, he looked right, left, then faced front. There! Another *Lucifer* whirling right for him: *Power*.

Later, Penn would wonder why *Power* wasn't spared. As *Dash Four*, her fighter was the farthest away, highest up. Theoretically, *Power* should've escaped the worst. Maybe, in those first few, critical seconds, she'd reversed hard, intending to bleed altitude and, in the confusion, lost sight of Penn. Or she'd gone into a spin and was just recovering, unaware of everyone else's position. Or maybe it was just bad luck.

They did the only thing they could. They broke: Penn angling up, and *Power* dropping to a dive. They should've missed one another. But, somehow, they didn't.

There was a violent lurch as *Power* clipped him, and Penn's *Lucifer* porpoised: breaching then falling, smacking air, hard. Tethered in his harness, Penn flopped and bounced like a fly in a spider's web. His vision swirled, the images zipping one after the other: a blur of aurora, then clouds, then the blackness of space directly ahead and the bright eyes of the distant, impersonal stars, then the orange flames of engines as the *Sholagars* shot themselves back into heaven.

Bucking, Penn's *Lucifer* climbed once more then flipped, belly-up, and now he saw the dizzying curtain of the aurora again, only directly overhead because he was upside down, and Penn had time for one jagged thought: *Please, God, don't let the power cut out, don't let . . .*

The power cut out. His engines failed, and Penn tumbled out of the sky like an angel fallen from grace.

Now, gravity counted. Penn was accelerating, shedding altitude at breakneck speed, the air sheeting, *howling* over his canopy. Gravity swelled like a gathering storm, then broke, washing over him like a gigantic wave hammering the shore. Gray ate at the edges of his vision, and he was gasping, pulling for air, vaguely aware of the bladders of his G-suit filling. Then, something took over: a combination of training and instinct and maybe just good old self-preservation because Penn grunted, *hard*. Bore down with all his might, forcing blood into the empty vessels that nourished his brain. And then he could think again. Not a whole lot. Just a little. But it was enough.

Got to reach the recovery switch. Struggling against unconsciousness, he moved one leaden arm, but it was hard work and his arm was so damn *heavy* and he'd never been so tired and banged up and beat up in his life. His right arm lifted with agonizing slowness, his finger shoving through air thicker than molasses. For a fraction of a second, maybe less, he couldn't remember why that stupid spin recovery switch was so damned important. His brain hitched over the problem. *Airspeed's zero . . . got to roll the ship . . . angle . . . down . . . got to angle down . . .*

There was pressure against his right index finger; now, through his glove, he felt the bite of the switch, a sense of something giving. Then, a shudder ripped through the *Lucifer*'s frame, and there came a loud, throaty rumble.

Then he saw something beyond his canopy, something whizzing in a blue-and-silver blur, then it was gone, then it came again, then gone, then again, and . . .

"Penn!" A voice lasering his brain: Menace, right beside him, dropping with him, staying with him, trying to talk him back from the dead. "Penn, Penn, you've got *power*! Penn, damn it, *answer* me! You've got

starboard engines, but you've rolled belly down, you're spinning! Penn, throttleback, get your nose down, get it down, *get it down!*”

Control, get control! And now Penn remembered why getting his nose down was so damned important: because his airspeed was zero, his *Lucifer* spinning counterclockwise, belly to the ground. He wasn't generating lift; there was no way for him to arrest his descent or break out of his spin unless he managed to cant his *Lucifer* and slew left into a controlled slide . . . but only if he went against instinct and notched his *powerdown* .

Penn fumbled, searching for the throttle. *Got to do this just right, can't let it cut out again* . He forced himself to move slowly and deliberately, throttling back in increments. The *Lucifer*'s spin let up a little, and he dragged his fighter's nose down ten degrees. Still not enough, but throttle back more and his engines might just cut out again.

Then he did something that, when he thought about it later on, saved his life and sure as hell wasn't in any manual. But he did it anyway.

Penn simultaneously throttled back and deployed his *Lucifer*'s nose and left landing gear—but not his right. Somewhere deep in his brain was this cockamamie plan: create enough drag to cant his errant ship down but *left* to break the fighter's horizontal plane enough to grab air.

Suddenly, he saw the horizon—and, dear God, he had dropped far enough for there to be a horizon—and clouds spread in a foamy cushion. *Thirty, forty degrees max . . . come on, come on, lemme see it . . .* The *Lucifer* still spun, but more drunkenly now, as if the craft were a top running out of kinetic energy. He kept inching back on power, knowing that, if push came to shove, he could land with one engine. That didn't happen, though, and in another second, Penn knew he was going to live through this.

“Damn,” said Menace. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Penn was soaked through with sweat. “Power?”

A pause. “Look down. Starboard.”

Penn looked. There, so small and distant Penn was afraid to blink because then the ship would be gone, a tiny speck plummeted, trailing a plume of dense, charcoal-colored smoke. And then Penn supposed there must be a god because, in the next second, as the full horror of what had happened broke against his mind, the clouds swallowed up the speck, and Samantha Will was gone.

He couldn't think anymore, not now. But much, much later Penn would float an idea: that the Dracs didn't give two shits about Prefecture I. Dracs took; Dracs destroyed; Dracs conquered. Dracs *didn't* make like no-seeums on a buggy summer's evening, teasing planetary militias into full-scale screwups. The Dracs were up to something, sure, but it wasn't about Tsukude, or Prefecture I. But Penn had a little problem: no evidence.

Something else would happen, too. A flight mishap investigatory board would convene. Penn would be cleared of negligence but only after countless repetitions of the disaster captured by a planetary satellite; and each time he saw the replay, something would rip in Penn's heart.

But that would be then—and this was now and, for now, Penn and Menace turned. And they went home.

*Conqueror's Pride, Proserpina**Prefecture III, Republic of the Sphere**20 November 3134**Control.*

Blinking away sweat, Antonia Chinn clutched her *shinai*, steadying the tip on an imaginary line with her opponent's throat. *Yeah, right, control; now if I could only get some . . .* She was so frustrated she wanted to snap her bamboo sword over her knee; maybe use it for kindling. But she wasn't going to back down, especially in front of the Old Master, Otome *Sensei*, motionless as a statue at one side of the *tatami*-matted *dojo*: a small man in traditional *keiko-gi* and *hakama*: black, flowing jacket and split, skirtlike trousers that brushed his ankles. Otome *Sensei*'s weathered features were relaxed in *zanshin*, watchful alertness.

Chinn blew out, then pulled in another breath, her nose crinkling at the smell of old, sweat-stained leather from the pad beneath her jaw. Hertenu *gui*, a red headband snugged against her forehead, had soaked through; her *keiko-gi* clung to her spine; and clammy sweat pooled at the waistband of her *hakama*.

She wondered if her opponent was fagged out. Doubted it. Her opponent stood three meters away, in a picture-perfect stance: shoulders relaxed, back straight, feet a fist's width apart, each heel two centimeters off the floor. A pair of unwavering, jet-black eyes glittered with the intensity of two lasers from behind a protective mesh of horizontal wires that formed the frontispiece of a navy blue helmet. To either side of her opponent's *men*, her face mask, a thick cowl of protective fabric flared in a design reminiscent of the helmets worn by the ancient samurai. Her opponent was taller by a half meter, but compensated for the difference, angling her *shinai* at waist level and inscribing an imaginary line that, had it been an arrow, would have whizzed through Chinn's throat and pinned her to the wall, like a butterfly to cardboard.

Just one lousy hit on target so I don't look like a complete idiot. It wasn't as if Chinn hadn't hit her opponent *anywhere*. Problem was all her hits had been off-target and illegal. So she had to figure how to trick her opponent into thinking that she meant to attack one place—say, *shomen-uchji*, a quick cut to the head—but end up striking another. Chinn's eyes darted to the apex of her opponent's *men*, then her left torso, and then back at her *shinai*. Okay, if she covered ground in a really fast *yumi-ashi*, pushing off on the ball of her right foot and springing forward on her left, yeah, she could feint a cut for the head but angle left as soon as her opponent moved to parry and then *POW!* Left chest cut, just below the ribs.

Chinn sucked in a deep breath, tasted the musk of sandalwood and the salt tang of sweat, pushed it out. "Toh!" She lunged, bare feet slapping wood hard enough to send ripples up her shins. She bounded one step, then two; at the second step, she saw her opponent take a half step back—and stop.

Go, go! Chinn pressed her attack, angling her *shinai* ninety degrees—and realized, too late, that she'd created an opening by moving the tip of her weapon off center. Her opponent whirred forward in a blur, and then there was a hard *smack* to the top of Chinn's head that she felt all the way into her teeth.

The Old Master raised a hand. “*Yame!*”

“Yeah, stop is right,” Chinn said, disgusted. She let her *shinai* drop with a clatter then pulled her left *kote* until the padded glove came free. “I’ve had it.”

Her opponent said nothing. But the Old Master glided over, almost soundlessly, his eyes flashing with disapproval. But when he spoke, his tone was mild. “This is the way of a warrior? To throw a tantrum like a spoiled child?”

The questions, so precise and to the point, made Chinn’s face hot with shame. Yanking off the helmet, she wiped sweat from her forehead to cover her embarrassment. “Maybe it’s not the way of a warrior, Otome *Sensei*, but there are times when you can practice too much.”

“Perhaps.” The Old Master had very brown eyes, but the orbits were marred with splotches of yellow that reminded Chinn of a broken yolk. “Yes, perhaps *practice* is the problem.” Then he told Chinn and her opponent precisely what he wanted them to do.

“Fight? Without armor? Without *anything*?” Chinn gawked, not sure she’d heard right. “You’ve got to be kidding. We can’t just *fight* . . .” She wanted to say *in the nude* but didn’t.

“Oh, of course we can,” said her opponent, shucking her helmet. Katana Tormark’s face was so slick with sweat, her chocolate-brown skin looked oiled. She, too, wore *atenugui* saturated with perspiration, and her hair, cut close in wavy locks, glistened and clung to her scalp. Her nimble fingers quickly peeled off her *do*, and she dropped the body armor onto her helmet. “Don’t you understand, Toni?” she said, unself-consciously high-stepping out of her *hakama*, then letting the black trousers puddle on the floor with a whisper of fabric against wood.

Chinn swallowed. Katana wore a black loincloth snugged tight over her hips. Her legs were very long, knotted with muscle in calf and thigh, and perfectly shaped. Katana was the most beautiful woman Chinn had ever seen, and it was all she could do to meet Katana’s eyes, keenly aware that her stomach cramped with longing. “Understand what?” she said, her voice suddenly husky, her mouth as dry as sand.

Katana worked the ties of her black cotton jacket, but her eyes never left Chinn’s. “As long as you keep practicing, you’ll never know real fear. You don’t *play kendo*; you *fight* in the way of the sword. You must be in fear of your life. Then your mind will be one with your body, and the sword merely an extension of the whole.” As she said this last, she pushed her jacket from her shoulders and let the *keiko-gi* slither to the floor.

Chinn’s chest squeezed. The sight of Katana’s sweat-stained body—high, rounded breasts; the ridges of an abdomen dewy with sweat; muscles that corded along her forearms—made everything recede into the background: her frustration and fatigue, even the Old Master. Her head felt hollow, and she was dizzy and a little breathless.

Man or woman, Katana could have anyone she wants, and yet she’s picked me.

“I,” she began, and swallowed again, struggling against a sudden wave of desire. Her voice firmed. “I can’t fight you that way, *Tai-sho*. I am Amaterasu and *achu-sa*. I have pledged my life for you.”

“Yes,” said Katana, her tone a low, melodic contralto. She stepped away from her clothes and reached out to draw the ball of her thumb along Chinn’s lips as her own curled into a half-moon. “But pledging loyalty and fighting for your life are two different things, *hai*? So,” she said, releasing Chinn and backing

away, "*Kore o kudasai.*"

Do this for me. Chinn's tongue flicked out to wet her parched lips; she could still feel the pressure from Katana's touch. "You know I'll give whatever you desire, *Tai-sho,*" she whispered.

Katana's lips parted in a silent laugh. "Later. But for now . . ." She turned, strode to a lacquered wooden stand, and plucked up a katana, still in its sheath. Balancing the blade in her hands, Katana's features suddenly tightened, and her eyes narrowed. "*Wefight.*"

"Until one is blooded," said the Old Master. Chinn flinched; she'd forgotten *Sensei* was there. But the old man took no notice of her discomfiture and merely withdrew to his position to watch . . . and to judge.

In a few moments they stood, katanas unsheathed and at the ready position. After sweltering in her armor, Chinn felt her sweat wick away, and a forest of gooseflesh suddenly erupted along her forearms. *This is for real. These are real katanas, and at best, they'll hurt like hell. At worst . . .* No, she wouldn't think the worst. The worst wouldn't happen. She wouldn't let anything happen to Katana, and she had to trust in Katana to do the same for her.

She cast her mind back over her last attack pattern. Now, in the calm after the storm, she knew her error. In the split second after she'd begun the attack, she'd been so focused on *connecting*, she'd lost track of *Katana herself*. Katana's counterattack had been as simple as it was devastating: exploiting Chinn's anticipation by executing a classic *debana-waza* that took advantage of Chinn's forward momentum. Chinn had come to Katana, and Katana had waited until Chinn was committed and couldn't pull back in time.

Chinn let her eyes run along the length of her sword and to Katana's throat. They were close enough for Chinn to see how Katana's skin bounded with her pulse, and the sight was a little unnerving. In the *dojo*, the exercise hall, she was used to glimpses of Katana's dark eyes and the barest outlines of her face—all that she could see when Katana wore *hermen*. But *this . . .* this was like giving the enemy an identity. It reminded her of something an instructor had told her once; that it was easier to kill a person when that person was an anonymous cipher within the hulking carcass of a 'Mech. Chinn shivered again, not with cold this time but with a sudden, sharp apprehension.

The Old Master hacked the air with his right hand. "*Hajime!*"

Instantly, Chinn sensed the change in Katana: the way Katana's muscles, strong as endosteel, tensed ever so slightly; the way her heels raised a centimeter from the floor so her weight balanced on the balls of her feet, ready to spring. Chinn readied herself, feeling Katana's eyes bore through hers and into her brain.

My mind is a pond. It was one of the Old Master's teachings, and now Chinn seized upon the words as a precious mantra. *My mind is a deep, still pond. I reflect everything and absorb all.* Her eyes locked onto Katana's: peering past them and into Katana's thoughts. *I am a pond; I am . . .*

Katana made a sudden shifting movement with her upper torso, and Chinn's eyes flicked away from Katana's blade for a brief second.

It was all the opening Katana needed. "*Yah!*" Even as the word flew from her lips, Katana mounted an attack. As she bounded forward, she brought her sword up into *jodan*, a ready position over the head whose attack angle was impossible to engage.

Startled back to alertness, Chinn resisted the temptation to glance up at Katana's blade and instead found her opponent's eyes, read their intent—a *head cut, right on center*—and quickly thrust her own sword out to parry. There was a clash of metal upon metal as their swords met, and Chinn felt the force of the blow shiver through the blade and into her arms as she batted away the attack, *herkiai* a high shriek: “*Toh!*”

Disengaging, Katana took a half step back, and then Chinn was spinning away to her left, her blade whirling to the ready. She faced forward just in time to see Katana advance again. Chinn saw it all in a flash: the way Katana's right foot stayed behind her left, the way her blade turned slightly counterclockwise. *A cut to the side!* As Katana brought her sword around in a two-handed thrust, Chinn parried, pushing her left foot diagonally left as she lifted her arms up and twirled her blade point-down and parallel to her left ear in the split second before Katana's blade sliced toward her middle. A clang as blade met blade, and then Chinn had disengaged, swinging her sword up and over her head as she slid her right foot behind her left.

“*Toh!*” she cried, whipping her blade down. The bright steel seemed to move in an agonizing stop-motion as Chinn's brain fought to control the speed of her thrust. *Can't hurt her, not really, I can't . . .*

“*Yah!*” Katana dropped into a squat, rotating her hands clockwise and stiff-arming her sword. Chinn's blade cut against the reinforced, notched *hi*. Chinn heard a scraping sound as steel slid against steel, and she felt a steady pressure pushing her sword aside. Suddenly, the pressure was gone and, without thinking, Chinn pulled back, angling her sword along the left side of her body, point-down, just as Katana swung left in a lethal cut aimed at Chinn's waist.

My God! Chinn barely had time to register the clash of steel before she had sprung back and out of range. *Too damn close.* She was winded, panting hard, slick rivulets of sweat coursing between her breasts. Her shoulders burned, and she could feel her calves knotting with fatigue.

A glance at Katana showed that even *she* felt the strain. Yet, even as Katana gulped air, her lips peeled back from her teeth in a feral grin. “You see?” she said, her words punctuated by deep gasps. “Fighting . . . is . . . different.”

Something tripped in Chinn's brain. *If she's talking, she can't be concentrating.* She forced her breathing to slow so she could hear over the roar in her veins. Something that *Sensei* had said very long ago: *Sound comes first. If you wait until your eye catches the attack, then you will die.*

Now Chinn concentrated all her effort into listening for the minutest change. She heard the thrum of her heart and forced her mind away from that; she heard air whistle through her nose, and she blocked that out, too. From Katana's position two meters distant, Chinn heard *hertai-sho* pulling in air: a long inhalation, then the rattle of air rushing from her lungs, in and out. And then, she heard a change so subtle that afterward she couldn't really describe it: a hitch and then a small, barely audible click, like the sound a dry throat made when a person swallowed.

Alarms clanged in her brain. *Now, she's coming right now!* Chinn didn't think; she acted. As Katana gave a loud *kiai* at the same instant that she attacked, Chinn's blade was already shooting out. Their swords made contact, and Chinn heaved up and out with her left hand, hard. Katana's sword cut on empty air; before she could retreat, Chinn leapt, her blade cutting for Katana's head. Katana ducked and bobbed to her left. Momentarily off-balance, Chinn's forward momentum carried her past Katana on her right and, for an instant, she thought about fighting gravity, struggling around for a quick counterattack.

But instead she let herself fall past Katana, twisting on the ball of her left foot and whirling in a complete circle until she faced forward. Just in time, too: Katana's left knee pistoned as she sprinted toward Chinn.

A flash of insight: *She expects me to pull back.* So Chinn did the opposite. Howling *herkiai*, Chinn erased the distance between them. Their blades clashed as their bodies collided; Chinn, who was the smaller and lighter of the two, staggered, then righted; and suddenly, they were nearly eye to eye, two lengths of glittering steel bracketing their faces in a shiny *V*, and so close Chinn felt Katana's hot breath slash her cheeks.

Got to get out of here. They were *intaiatari*, blades locked, the most dangerous position in which two swordsmen could find themselves. Chinn knew that the only way she could escape would be to move Katana's sword from center while angling her body away and trying to push Katana off balance. The problem was that Chinn was too small, and she could already feel Katana pushing *forcing* Chinn's blade out of line. Grunting, Chinn tried holding the stance until her shoulders and forearms screamed with pain. Gathering her strength, Chinn pushed back with all her might, up and left; and just when she thought she couldn't hold Katana anymore, she sucked in one last breath of air and thought: *Push up and then drop into a squat and then when she's fallen past . . .*

And then Katana let go.

Startled, Chinn gave a yelp of surprise as she staggered forward, realizing much too late that, somehow, she'd betrayed herself again, and then she stopped thinking as she heard the high zing of metal slicing air, saw the cut coming fast as lightning.

The Old Master shouted at the last possible second. "*Yame!*"

Katana froze, and Chinn felt the bite of metal on the sensitive skin along the right side of her neck. She closed her eyes, aware that there was blood trickling into the hollow between her breasts; aware, too, that Katana's breathing was harsh and rapid; aware that, when she saw the cut coming, she'd thought she might really die.

Opening her eyes, Chinn looked into the eyes of *hertai-sho* and then let her sword clatter to the floor. "And so you've killed me," she said.

For a moment, Katana did not reply, and then Chinn saw the bunched muscles of Katana's jaw relax, her shoulders slacken. Katana lifted her blade from Chinn's neck, and Chinn saw that the steel was marred by a smear of bright red blood.

"Killed you? No," said Katana. Then she moved closer, and in the next instant Chinn felt Katana's tongue tease her neck, linger over her cut flesh. Chinn's knees went to water, and her breath caught as a sudden wave of hot desire flooded her veins.

Katana took Chinn's face in her hands. "I haven't killed you yet," she whispered, running her tongue along Chinn's lips, and Chinn tasted the salty metallic tang of her own blood. Moaning, Chinn closed her eyes, drowning in sensation, and she heard Katana say, softly, "Not quite yet."

Pesht Military District, Draconis Combine

15 December 3134

Vincent Kurita ceased speaking, and the resulting silence in the Black Room was so complete that it was almost a sound itself. ISF Director Ramadeep Bhatia was aware of the rush of his breath whistling through his nostrils, the creak of a leather boot as an aide shifted uneasily. Yet silence was also valuable, a tool that was as useful and potentially lethal as the most accurate assassin if one knew how to use it, when to exploit it. Bhatia did, and silence was, he decided, one of Vincent Kurita's few talents—such as they were.

Bhatia looked through his lashes, his coal black eyes sliding round to the others gathered at the table, the warlords he could observe with relative ease because they sat directly opposite, ranged down the long axis of the smoky glass-topped table. (There were also three irrelevant aides hugging the far wall, one for each *tai-shu*.) One warlord who had not been the target of the coordinator's pointed remarks—Pesht's Doppo Saito—looked decidedly uncomfortable, even a little frightened, and this was probably a good thing because a frightened man was easily tamed. Saito might not be a weakling but he was a worm nonetheless, corrupted by luxury: a florid, doughy man, with puffy cheeks and stubby, bejeweled fingers, fat around as sausages and dimpled at the joints.

By contrast, Bhatia thought that New Samarkand's *Tai-shu* Matsuhari Toranaga looked hungry. Solidly built, of above-average height, Toranaga had a square face lit by glittering black eyes. *More and more, he always wants more, though his territory is the largest and borders on the Federated Suns.* Highly intelligent and motivated by a boundless avarice for more and more power, yet able to bide his time, Toranaga was, Bhatia thought, just the man he might require.

Might. Bhatia's eyes slid to the third man, a bull: Mits-ura Sakamoto, Warlord of Benjamin, descendant of Ta-hara Sakamoto of the First Sword of Light . . . and a damnable hothead. *If he wasn't so valuable, I'd leave Sakamoto to his wine and women and focus on Toranaga, and what my spies tell me is a rather interesting wild card. But not just yet.*

The silence was broken when Sakamoto swallowed hard. “*Tono*, I must protest. I have *nothing* to apologize for, and even less to explain.”

And let us see how the Peacock handles that. Bhatia kept his eyes averted, as custom and manners demanded. One did not look to the coordinator for answers until the coordinator deigned to speak, yet Bhatia saw him well enough. The glass was polished to a high gloss; the coordinator was to his immediate left; and from beneath his hooded lids Bhatia observed Kurita's reflection: ghostlike and a little eerie, the head seemingly floating above the *jetshou* jacket shot through with rich golden embroidery that twinkled like the light of faraway stars. Yes, Vincent Kurita was a peacock, all pomp and showy feathers and hollow at the core; a bitter pill, and one the Combine had to swallow—for the time being.

“No?” Kurita's tone was mild, and Bhatia strained to detect any undercurrents—of displeasure or malice—and found none. Bhatia suppressed a sigh. *And just what will shake this man from his complacency?* He looked up, already knowing what he would see: a broad smooth brow surmounted by raven-black hair coiffed into a high powder puff like a storm cloud (more tinsel and glitter: Bhatia knew that Kurita's real hair was white as spun sugar); hazel eyes set in an oval, delicate, slightly feminine face just beginning to show its years in the tracery of fine wrinkles fanning from the corner of each eye. Kurita's features were bland, the corners of his mouth hooked in the quizzical, politic expression of a host who can't quite place the name of the man to whom he's just been introduced.

Kurita steepled his delicate, manicured fingers. “You deliberately cross the border into Prefecture I; not once, not twice, but a dozen times? You risk good men and valuable materiel? For what purpose?”

“Purpose?” Sakamoto pushed out a mouthful of air in a breathy grunt of angry amazement. “We are the Draconis Combine, and you ask about purpose? Our purposes *should* be clear.”

Not cowed in the slightest. Bhatia gave the warlord an appraising look. Sakamoto was big, taller than Kurita by a half meter, with the squashed face and hefty physique of a barrel-chested wrestler going to seed. His bulbous nose trembled with suppressed rage, and a pulsing network of spidery, bloodred capillaries spoke of a man with earthy appetites who took his pleasure in the conquest of women and one too many late-night bottles of plum wine. *A drunk and a womanizer, he brays the loudest of the three and makes the Peacock look like a fuzzy dowager decked out in her Sunday best.*

Kurita was speaking. “*Tai-shu* Sakamoto, our purpose lies in the security of the Combine, nothing more or less. We have enough to occupy us. There is no need to expose our people to potential privation and bloodshed.”

“Privation,” Sakamoto grated. “What do they know of that, of anything but their own comforts?”

“And are you so very different, *Tai-shu*? Yes, true, we’ve only known three decades of true peace after the second war with Clan Ghost Bear, and if memory serves, we defended ourselves. We did not set out to conquer. Since 3102 our armies have been”—Kurita paused—“*culled*. Of course, we still know how to wage small-unit actions, but do you or any of your troops really know how to wage a full-scale, multiworld operation? What, pray tell, do *you* know of that kind of war?” Again, Kurita’s tone was mild, and although Bhatia despised Kurita’s pretentiousness—the royal *we*—he had to admit that the insult was as pointed as the *kissaki* of a well-honed blade.

Sakamoto opened his mouth to answer, then closed it again, and Bhatia put a hand to his mouth to hide a smile. The man looked like a beached fish that had swum too close to shore and been tossed on the sand.

But it was a man to Kurita’s right who spoke next. His face was square, the skin tanned and leathery from sun, and the features heavier, like the work-coarsened face of a day laborer. But he had the frosted-blue eyes of the Kuritas, and the same broad forehead, though his hair was a lion’s mane of lush black streaked with comets’ tails of silver. “That may be true, *Tono*, but even you know that a largely unblooded army may be formidable nonetheless. And we’re not talking about an enemy with the resources to mount any serious resistance.”

“Listen to your son, *Tono*.” An almost silken purr from Toranaga. “Theodore Kurita speaks true.”

“Really?” said Kurita, with a hint of dryness. “And does he speak for *you*, *Tai-shu*?”

Toranaga blinked, but before he could reply, Theodore leaned forward. “Father, the Combine is vast. The Republic doesn’t have the will to conquer, nor to defend itself. With the HPGs gone, The Republic will almost certainly fall, the prefectures toppling one after the other like dominoes; we all know that.”

Well played. Bhatia approved. Theodore Kurita might not have the intellectual nimbleness or fiery spirit of his namesake, but he was a prudent, clear-sighted man. *A pity he has no heirs, else he might be an acceptable replacement for the Peacock.* It was a well-known secret that Theodore’s Chomie was infertile. After four miscarriages there were mutterings about adoption, or else the Combine faced the

unthinkable: a less than pure Kurita as substitute. Why Theodore refused to take a lover mystified Bhatia. Well, perhaps Theodore loved his wife—and *that* particular display of sentimentality Bhatia considered a fateful flaw. A true ruler never let little things like matrimonial vows and fidelity interfere with the smooth running of the machinery of state.

Sakamoto seized on the brief silence. “Your son is right, *Tono*. The Republic will not fight, or if they do, they will not do it well and the fight will be brief. Their forces are negligible, and what men they do have are untried and untrained, as soft as ripe peaches.”

Theodore opened his mouth, but Kurita held up a single finger without glancing at his son, and Theodore subsided. “That may be true,” said Kurita, his placid eyes never wavering from Sakamoto’s face, “but we have not given you permission to taste the fruit of that particular tree.”

“And why not?” Sakamoto demanded, belligerent as a mule. “Surely you don’t regard that Vega fiasco last year as a setback? There’s not a shred of evidence The Republic had anything to do with it, and even if they had, why should we let that deter us? If anything, our failure to take Vega should impel us to erase the dishonor! You don’t see The Republic standing in Katana Tormark’s way!”

“Her course is her own affair and will not dictate how we navigate ours, and *we* say it is not yet our time.”

“Then when? What, are you waiting for a sign to drop from the heavens? An auspicious omen? Every day we do not act is another day the Clans muster the will; every moment that passes is opportunity for the Capellans to launch a new campaign. What better moment than *right* now, while The Republic’s besieged on different fronts?”

“We have tried.” And now Kurita’s gaze fell on Bhatia. “We have failed. Vega was a sign that we are not as strong as we would like to believe.”

Ouch. Not as caustic a rebuke as other, more paranoid coordinators would have made; Takashi sprang to mind. Still, the barb stung, and Bhatia knew that he couldn’t let the moment pass without an attempt at defense, and most particularly not when this little drama was being played under the watchful eyes of the warlords. “Yes, *Tono*, we were sabotaged. But we have reason to believe that we were compromised through the misdeed of one particular malcontent, someone with an ax to grind against the Combine, and we are seeking for ways to bring him to swift and certain justice.” (A little piece of flummery and pure fiction, but appearances, appearances: Bhatia was certain they could dredge up some anonymous soul to put to an ignominious death.) “Our intelligence apparatus has been”—and Bhatia chose the word with exquisite care—“*hampered* by the HPG outage, nothing more.”

“Oh, don’t play at words, Bhatia,” Sakamoto said, his tone just the near side of a sneer. “You and your ISF haven’t the teeth anymore; you’re as ineffective as a toothless old grandmother, and you know it.”

Bhatia heard someone suck in a horrified, melodramatic gasp—Saito, probably, the worm—but Bhatia paid no attention. Instead, he leaned forward, snagged Sakamoto’s gaze with his own, and said, “Take care, *Tai-shu*, else you might discover that I have no need for anyone to feed me soft, sweet rice just yet.”

The menace was clear, and Bhatia saw by the nervous click of Sakamoto’s eyes away then back that the warning had struck its mark. “I . . . apologize, Director,” said Sakamoto, though he said the word as if it left a bad taste in his mouth. “I meant no disrespect. I let the heat of the moment go to my head.”

“Indeed,” said Bhatia, and he did not smile. “Someday you may discover that, much to your regret, your head lacks a tongue to wag.” He saw the struggle in Sakamoto’s eyes; could practically hear the ticking in the man’s brain as he calculated just how aggressively—and if—he should respond. Oh, Bhatia’s threat was real enough. The ISF might’ve been scaled down by the original Theodore’s reforms, and those of his son Hohiro. Yet even those mighty rulers had known this truism: One cannot prick a tiger too sharply or often, and expect to live very long.

“Indeed,” Sakamoto finally managed, though his tone was less brutish. His face had drained of color like water trickling through a sieve, and the tremor Bhatia saw twitch at the man’s mouth was not rage but fear.

Sakamoto turned his gaze back to Kurita, clearly the easier target, and when he spoke it was with less heat. “*Now* is our opportunity to strike. Why do you hesitate? The Republic’s forces are thin as tissue paper, and the miserable excuses they have for their planetary militias—bah! A lowly farmer with a scythe or pike would make for a better adversary. Every moment you delay heightens the perception of our weakness. Look at the Capellans; they’re scum, and yet they honor their dead chancellor as a god and have struck the first blow, driving into the heart of Prefecture V and securing Liao. A prefecture capital! We haven’t slipped a toe across any border since last year!”

“Not counting your unauthorized, illegal forays into Prefecture I,” said Kurita, “no, we haven’t.”

The warning was clear, but Bhatia saw that Sakamoto was too carried away by his own arguments to hear. “Your ancestor ceded valuable lands and planets to a Republic built upon a house of cards that has now begun to topple. They are *weak*; they will not act, and we must. And what about Tormark? Her family’s disgraced, their lands confiscated, their status worse than beggars, and yet you allow that little girl to use your name!”

Careful. Much as Bhatia admired the man’s tenacity—Sakamoto was like a pit bull that way—first the swipe *athim*, then Hohiro and now *this* insult . . . Bhatia’s eyes swiveled to gauge the reactions of the others. Saito was, predictably, nibbling the cuticle of one pudgy thumb; Toranaga’s eyes were hooded in calculation. *Perchance a very useful man if Sakamoto fails. And what of our noble heir?* Bhatia saw that Theodore was thin-lipped; his cheeks ruddy with anger and . . . was that *shame*? Bhatia’s eyes narrowed. Yes, he could see it: the quick tick of Theodore’s eyes to his father and then to scrutiny of a spot on the glass table that seemed to be of intense interest. *He is ashamed because in his heart he agrees.*

Kurita was unruffled. “We remind you that this *littlegirl*, as you call her, has managed, with few resources and sheer charisma, to conquer worlds and sway others.”

“Which she has claimed in the name of Dragon’s Fury,” said Sakamoto.

“And which she has now ceded to us,” Kurita corrected. “A little late in coming, and a bit roundabout. The fact that she claims worlds for the Combine reveals our strength, not our weakness.”

“Listen to yourself!” Sakamoto threw up his hands in disgust. “All the more reason to *act!* First, it was Dragon’s Fury; now she says she battles in the name of the Dragon! Don’t you *see*, *Tono*? The people will not care. All they will know is that you sit in your palace day after day, swathed in luxury and decked out in finery, while a female from a dishonored family is the one who gets dirt beneath her nails and blood on her sword. You . . . must . . . *act*,” said Sakamoto, emphasizing every word. “You. *Must.*”

“Or what?” Kurita’s hazel eyes were mere slivers now, and when he spoke there was a subdued yet

discernible hiss, like the whisperings of a snake. “Do you have other plans for yourself? Forus? A replacement, perhaps? If so, then please, share this with us for we are most anxious to know your mind.” He paused, then added as if in afterthought, “*Our Tai-shu.*”

His meaning was clear: *You serve at my pleasure. Nothing less, and certainly not more.* And as the mortified Sakamoto stammered out an apology and the coordinator gave orders that there were to be no more unauthorized forays into Republic space, Bhatia had to admit that the man still had a vestige of the old Kurita spark, that fire of history and myth.

A pity that, in Bhatia’s opinion, the flame wasn’t quite bright enough.



Imperial City, Luthien

24 December 3134

The teacup was immensely old; stippled brown with smooth, teal enamel. As fingers of scented steam caressed his face, Vincent Kurita inhaled, held the breath, then let go with a sigh. Then he took a small sip, the delicate flavors of frothy green tea exploding on his tongue. The taste conjured memories of laughter and his wife and their three children, before things got so . . . grim.

Grim, yes. Vincent eyed Theodore, who knelt upon *histatami* and gazed into the middle distance. The balcony overlooked the palace gardens—mossy green hummocks and still pools festooned with green saucers of lotus. Vincent said, “You are very quiet, my son.” They were at their ease, so Vincent felt no imperative to employ the royal *we*; an affectation that was amazingly effective.

Theodore flinched out of his reverie. “I apologize, Father. It’s just”—and now he turned his blue eyes to Vincent—“maybe Sakamoto has a good point.”

“Indeed? Tell me.” And then, as he saw Theodore hesitate, Vincent said gently, “I am no Takashi. I am secure in your love, my son.” He was rewarded by seeing the tension drain from Theodore’s features.

“I understand your concerns completely, Father. But Sakamoto’s right and *you know* he’s right. The Republic thinks it’s invincible, with Terra at its center and the prefectures ringing round. But they’re wrong. Devlin Stone’s gone, and whatever he is, Levin’s no substitute. Without something to bind the prefectures together, the core rots, and the tree dies.” He leaned forward, earnestly. “*You are* the core of the tree that is the Draconis Combine, Father. The Kuritas are the sap running through its veins. But we’ve lost the throne before and might again if you remain silent.”

“Just as I am not Takashi, I am not Robert Kurita either. And who would be my Nihongi Von Rohrs? Sakamoto? I think not. He’s a bully, and his ego drives him to assume too much.”

“Then why allow him to continue as warlord?”

Vincent gave a careless shrug. “Because he serves my purpose. When he no longer does, he won’t be in a position to argue the point.”

“And Katana Tormark?”

“What about her?”

“Father, she’s out there seizing planets in the Combine’s *name* . . .”

“A recent development, as Sakamoto so indelicately pointed out. Good thing, too; she had me worried for a while.”

“Father, this is *serious!* Katana’s family was disgraced, their assets seized after Akira took his O5P cell and *defected* to Devlin Stone’s cause! Your inaction is an *endorsement* that this *daughter* of a disgraced Combine lord speaks for *you!* Father, she’s challenged you to a duel, to come out of hiding. Why don’t you?”

Well spoken, well reasoned. Vincent was impressed yet again with how astute his son was. *He will be a fine ruler some day.* Then, on the heels of that thought, a darker one, edged with sadness: *But will House Kurita survive if Theodore cannot escape the curse that swims in our blood?* Vincent clamped down on the path where that thought would lead. He stalled, choosing a pastry from a platter and popping it into his mouth. The sweet, rich bean paste melted into a taste like nuts and honey. *Just as one does not cry over the sweetness of candy, so I shall not grieve now.* He swallowed and said, “What I do, I do. We will not engage The Republic, and we will not *directly* interfere with Katana Tormark.”

Theodore missed the emphasis. “Even if that threatens the Combine.”

“*I am* the Combine. So . . . yes.” Vincent waited a beat. “Should I be concerned about you?”

Theodore blinked, and Vincent saw a wash of first astonishment then anger flood across his son’s face. “You know I stand with you, Father.”

“But someday you must be coordinator, and that may mean, for the good of the Combine, you might have to depose me.”

Theodore’s Adam’s apple bobbed in a hard swallow. “I will succeed you, Father—never depose or replace you.”

Chuckling, Vincent patted his son on the shoulder, then cupped Theodore’s neck with his palm. He’d done that often after eight-year-old Theodore declared he was a man, too old for hugs. So Vincent met the boy—and now the man—halfway with a gesture of love acceptable to both. “Very good. You’ll make a politician yet.”

He was relieved when Theodore laughed, snaked his right hand around, and squeezed Vincent’s hand. “I’ve had an excellent *sensei*,” Theodore said.

“Indeed. Now, I have something to show you.” Withdrawing his hand, Vincent reached inside his teal blue silk jacket, enjoying the feel of the rich material. *My one weakness. Well, better than a woman. Women get you into trouble.* Extracting an envelope made of rice paper, he handed it to his son. Theodore thumbed open the flap and Vincent saw his son’s keen eyes moving over the paper; saw shock and then delight.

Theodore’s head snapped up. “Arlington? And the Fifth Sword of Light!”

Vincent laughed. “High time you had something important to do, and I guarantee you, with the Federated Suns close at hand, you might see battle. But all in good time. First, settle into your new command, though I promise you: These are not the riffraff Vegans who so plagued your namesake. These are good men and will serve you well when the time comes. Now, tell me, where are you off to next?”

If Theodore was perplexed by his father’s sudden shift, he didn’t show it. But the happiness drained out of his eyes. “I thought to visit my sister and”—he hesitated—“and then my brother and . . . our mother.”

“Ahh,” was all Vincent said. But it was as if his son had slipped a knife between his ribs, found his heart and given the knife a good, solid twist. This time when he met his son’s gaze, he saw his sadness mirrored there. “Give your mother my love,” said Vincent, “if she will have it.”

Then, he picked up his cup and turned aside to watch the sunset. “Now drink your tea, my son, before it gets cold.”

Luthien Nadir Jump Point

Draconis Combine, Pesht Military District

24 December 3134

If Proserpina Prefecture Commander *Tai-sho* Carol Worrige knew anything, she knew this: Sakamoto was a decent warlord but a lousy drunk. A damn nuisance, too, because the man commanded his district with a mixture of bribery, threats and—at times—downright brilliance.

“Until the time is right.” Sakamoto threw back another goblet of plum wine, burped loudly, then waited, snorting like a horse through his nostrils, as his aide, *Sho-sa* Aki Mori, refilled his glass from a tall, cut-glass decanter. Satisfied, Sakamoto gave Mori a backhanded wave that sent the man scuttling. Sakamoto took another huge swallow. “When is the time *ever* right?”

Worrige judged this was rhetorical, and considering that Sakamoto still wore his swords, she didn’t reply. *Give the wrong answer, and he’s as liable to bite my head off as give me a promotion* . Anyway, Sakamoto was just talking. She was used to Sakamoto’s moods, which became particularly foul when he was cooped up in a DropShip the way he was now.

“I’ll tell you when it’s the right time,” Sakamoto said, florid from too much plum wine and festering rage. “*Never!* That’s when.”

“I’m sure the coordinator has his reasons,” she said diplomatically.

“Bah!” Sakamoto inhaled wine, sucked air through his teeth at the sting, swallowed. “The worst of it is that little *girl* from a dishonored family claiming lands for the Dragon while I twiddle my thumbs. Bah! I’m *asamurai!*” he said, thumping his broad chest with his bunched left fist. “I’m *awarrior* , not some old, toothless woman!”

“Absolutely not,” said Mori, looking grieved. Worrige thought the *sho-sa* did righteous indignation rather well for an obsequious little runt. “But until the coordinator . . .”

“*Damn* the coordinator!” Sakamoto bellowed. Wine sloshed over the rim, drizzling across his fingers like watery blood. “*Damn them all!*”

Mori glided forward, patting a napkin over Sakamoto's fingers with something close to the *tut-tut* of a fussy mother hen. "If anyone has more right to act on the Dragon's behalf than Tormark's little girl, it's you. After all, *who* is Akira Tormark?"

Sakamoto sucked plum wine from his thumb. "*Dead*, for one."

"That's right. And disgraced, for another. So, I ask you, who better? Besides"—Mori folded the now-stained napkin into neat, perfect squares four times over and tucked the offending linen in his hip pocket—"it may be that the coordinator *requires* someone to show him the correct path."

At that, Worridge's jaw dropped. The bridge became quite still and, for a moment, all Worridge heard was the *bleep-blip-blap* of various control circuits. Sakamoto's glass had been halfway to his mouth, but now he lowered it and his eyes narrowed to dark, glittery slits. "What did you say, Mori?"

Worridge saw Mori's throat working. *Yeah, I'll bet your neck's wondering if it's going to have a job in this next two, three seconds.*

Mori squared his shoulders. "Perhaps you need to show the coordinator the error of his ways, my *Tai-shu*."

Well, either the guy had guts, or he was insane. Whichever, he was spouting treason, and Worridge knew there were troops here who needed to be reminded of that. For that matter, she had to rein in Sakamoto before he got them all killed. Worridge said, cautiously, "*Sho-sa* Mori, you are indelicate." There: simple, direct.

Sakamoto's head swiveled, his eyes lingering long enough to make her sweat, and then back at Mori. "She means you're talking treason. She's right, you know."

Mori squared his shoulders. "*Nevertheless.*"

"Nevertheless," repeated Sakamoto, his tone thoughtful. "Never . . . the . . . *less* ." Then, his lips lifted from his teeth in a slow, sly smile. "And, in this case, less *is not* more, is it . . . *Mori* ?" Sakamoto threw his head back in a loud cackle. "*Less* is not *Mori* !"

Oh, puh-leez. Worridge suppressed a groan.

Mori hesitated for a fraction of a second, and then let out a little giggle—a joke at his expense, ha-ha, very funny. "No, *Tai-shu* ," he said.

"*Allright* then!" Sakamoto threw back wine and brought the goblet down on a workstation so hard Worridge was amazed the glass didn't shatter. "*Here* is what we will do, my dear *Lessi Mori* ! We shall amass strength at Algedi, Waddesdon"—he ticked them off on his thick, rough fingers—"and . . . Kurhah, *hai* ? You're getting this?"

Mori, that little suck-up, was scribbling madly in a tiny notebook he kept tucked in his breast pocket for just such an occasion. "Absolutely."

"Then half-strength troops to Homan, Matar and Klathandu IV." Sakamoto put his hands on his hips, nodded once. "Yes, *Lessi Mori*. That should do it."

Half-strength troops? If The Republic struck back, Worridge would be sending perfectly good men to their deaths. *Not gonna happen on my watch.* She cleared her throat. “Pardon me, *Tai-shu*, but you must receive the coordinator’s . . .”

That was as far as she got. In the blink of an eye, Sakamoto’s face went from red, to pale, to the colored of clotted blood. “I will worry about where and how *my* troops are to be deployed, not the coordinator, and not *you*. I am the final authority; it rests with *me* because I tell you this: by his inaction, the coordinator has lost the *right* to tell *me* what to do and what to think! Are we *clear* on this?”

Worridge did a swift calculation. No, she didn’t like it. And, yes, if she persisted, Sakamoto would have her head, and then, well, really, what was the point? “*Hai, Tai-shu.* It was not the coordinator I was thinking of so much as wondering where we’ll get the manpower for an operation of this magnitude.” Sounded really good, and it helped that it was the truth. “I am simply worried about materiel and troops. *Informing* the coordinator”—yes, she liked that word better than *asking permission*—“would likely be followed by the requisite troops.”

Sakamoto made an impatient gesture, shooing her away. “I have other resources.” And to Mori: “Get word to Kobayashi, Ame and Endo. They are to be on Benjamin within the next two months, understood?”

Who? Worridge frowned, and she was about to ask when Mori said, “I anticipated that, my *Tai-shu*, and took the liberty of dispatching messages a day ago.”

Okay, Worridge was impressed: Mori was a suck-up *and* clairvoyant. For his part, Sakamoto squinted at Mori, waited a beat, said, “Did you now?”

Then, before Worridge had time to blink, Sakamoto reared back. There was a blinding flash, a high-pitched whistle as air cleaved in two. Mori stood there for a brief instant, a bemused expression on his face. And then a bright red ribbon leaked through an invisible seam and dribbled down to soak the collar of his uniform. Mori’s head lolled as if his neck had turned to gelatin and then plopped to the deck, face-first. The sound was indescribable, really, but it reminded Worridge of when she was ten and dropped a watermelon on the porch, and the watermelon had burst.

Mori’s body didn’t follow right away. Instead, bright, apple-red blood arced to the deck, sounding like water against a ceramic basin. Mori’s body wasn’t exactly stiff, or limp, but his hands jerked up in a sort of surprise, like the hands of a marionette whose puppeteer’s twitched the wrong string. And then Mori, who was definitely *lessi* now, toppled like a felled tree.

In the complete and absolute silence that followed—save for computers chittering away—Sakamoto inspected his sword. The blade was clean; he’d struck that quickly. Then he resheathed his katana, the metal rasping into its scabbard, and casually uncorked his decanter. Wine glugged into Sakamoto’s goblet and Worridge caught the faint squeal of the decanter’s stopper as Sakamoto re-corked it.

Sakamoto lifted his glass to Worridge in a toast. “A person who anticipates you has already succeeded you in his mind, Worridge, and actions follow hard upon thought. Please remember, *Tai-sho*: There is only room for one *tai-shu*.”

Then he threw back his drink and exhaled with satisfaction. “And Worridge—get someone to clean up this mess.”

Imperial City, Luthien

24 December 3134

The gardens were cool; the sky a brilliant pink that faded to purple as the sun's light refracted against the skin of the world, and at his feet was a sea of white stone. Bhatia's eyes traveled over the carefully etched lines that curled and eddied around an island of rock, a hillock of moss. The center of the stone sea was an absolute masterstroke: a spiral twining to a single, absent point, like an endless pinwheel.

And that is the Combine, the unseen pivot about which the universe turns. Bhatia considered that it might also be an apt metaphor for what the best coordinators were: the null space at the center of a wheel. Only Vincent Kurita, that Peacock, was simply null.

And Sakamoto was wrong about one thing. The ISF hadn't lost its teeth, but with the HPG outage it might as well have lost its eyes and ears. Couriered messages still trickled in, but often the information was outdated and useless. Bhatia grunted. That they'd found out about the Capellans was a stroke of luck, a piece of information that crossed his desk from a reliable source long embedded on Liao, though *that* source had gone silent—a disturbing turn that had Bhatia wondering if the Capellans had managed to penetrate far enough to conquer Liao.

And there was also Katana Tormark, that little witch! Bhatia felt a sudden headache thump to life behind his eyes. Oh, *justthinking* about her set his teeth on edge! A father, once the pride of O5P, turned Republican sympathizer, and then a planetary governor, no less! Thank heaven *he'd* the foresight to embed an agent into her command, no thanks to the Peacock. *That* idiot had blathered on about letting others fight and blah, blah, blah. Oh, it was *galling*: the offspring of a discredited, dishonored man laying bare the Combine's weakness!

Find yourself a high pedestal, little girl, because it will hurt that much more when you fall.

Sakamoto was the key. Yes, Toranaga was cunning and might still be useful, and hadn't there been something in Toranaga's eyes as he'd turned to go? Bhatia thought. Yes, for a fraction of a second, he and Toranaga had exchanged significant glances, and it was as if the warlord had shot some invisible message, reminding Bhatia that . . . what? There was yet this other card that might be played?

Perhaps. Bhatia shook his mind free of Toranaga. For the moment, if *any* warlord stood a chance of reclaiming Combine worlds while eliminating the tiresome Tormark, it was Sakamoto. True, Sakamoto was a drunk and a bully, and Bhatia found the idea of Sakamoto's wagging tongue minus its mouth supremely pleasing. But Sakamoto was still an asset, and if he could be played? Then the Peacock would have two choices; total disavowal, or an unconditional sanction. In the first case, Sakamoto would die, and Bhatia wouldn't necessarily weep. In the second, though, the Peacock would take credit and *that* was good for the Combine.

But I will have to play this just right: let Sakamoto start his little invasion and then bide my time, choose the precisely correct moment to tell the Peacock.

And if Kurita wanted Sakamoto's head? No matter: Sakamoto was merely the tool Bhatia needed to pick the lock of the treasure chest that was House Kurita, and Combine honor. And who knew? There might be an unexpected bonus or two; perhaps the bitch would stand against Sakamoto, and if she did . . . A shiver of unexpected delight rippled along Bhatia's skin and made the hairs stand on end. *Squashed underfoot like a bug*. He laughed silently, like a dog, and ran his palms along his thighs.

His right trouser pocket crackled, and his good humor evaporated like mist on a hot morning. A report

he'd already read, and didn't like. Pulling out the paper, he reread the message, taking his time, letting the words brand themselves on his brain.

Kappa. The word leapt from the page. Every time he came to it, his mind tripped, as if he'd stubbed a mental toe against a rock. Kappa was—*had been*—a Son of the Dragon, a member of a cadre of elite agents: the legendary Subhash Indrahar's eyes and ears and teeth. A powerful mystic and utterly ruthless, Indrahar had been the greatest ISF director in Combine history as well as a personal friend to Takashi Kurita and mentor to Takashi's son, Theodore. Yet Indrahar's power hadn't been his Sons. The agents had died in the Jihad, and their records had disappeared. Bhatia had resurrected the Sons—the idea of such a useful inner circle was too brilliant to ignore—but development of the group was slow and expensive.

But *nowhere* was Kappa, and without his knowledge of the Sons, Bhatia still mightn't have made the connection. A serial killer on an obscure little world, what of it? But there was that *veryodd* victim—a man whose body hadn't been mutilated—followed by a tape from the killer calling himself *Kappa*: a creature from ancient myth . . . and one of the most brilliantly eccentric and lethal deep-cover agents Indrahar ever created. *As if he wanted to catch my attention. But he can't be the same man. He'd be nearly a hundred*. Kappa's heir, perhaps? And why *surfacenow*?

He didn't know. But ISF Director Ramadeep Bhatia shivered all the same, even though it wasn't cold.



Makuhari Beach, Quant-tze, Biham

Prefecture II, Republic of the Sphere

24 December 3134

The sea air was mercifully cool and crisp, with an aroma of salt and the faintest lacing of aluminum. A light gust of wind skimmed Sir Reginald Eriksson's forehead, fingering the thinning remnants of what had once been a silky cap of hair the color of corn tassels but was now bleached white as a sun-dried bone. Eriksson patted his hair into place with his left hand, but that meant he moved his feet a little to compensate for the way the sand shifted, and a needle of pain stabbed at his right hip. Annoyed, he leaned into his cane to redistribute his weight. Like him, the cane was a relic: wood-kilned amaranth with a bright violet grain and a brass L-shaped handle worn smooth by three generations of Erikssons. Sir Reginald's only child, Rachel, had died in childbirth forty years ago, her baby stillborn. With them went the hopes of a noble line.

A wave crested, curled and then fell in upon itself, foaming along a tawny stretch of sand before withdrawing in lengthening fingers that pulled away with a soft hiss. *Time's like that sea, always moving, forever impatient*. And if time was the remorseless sea, then he was the sand, he supposed, being slowly eaten away by time's passage.

The sand whispered again, though this time from behind; boots trudging over pulverized earth. And then he heard her voice: "You're a hard man to find, Sir Reginald."

Eriksson gave a dry chuckle as she came alongside. "Perhaps, Katana, I want to discourage the fainthearted. I could have you arrested, you know. You're quite the outlaw." He eyed her, liking what he

saw. By God, she looked good, fit. The sun made her skin glow. Her deep black hair was a bit longer now, edging her oval face with undulating waves. The style made her look less severe and highlighted the high bones of her cheeks, the slightly feline tilt of her black eyes. Besides her calf-high black leather boots, Katana wore olive green combat fatigues, a stylized, apple green *katakana* numeral five on her left collar set off against a cherry red background. Stitched over the right breast pocket was her faction's symbol: a riff of the Kurita dragon edging a circle of fiery red on which three black diamonds and one white formed the four sides of a diamond standing on point. His eyes flicked to her waist, and his brows lifted. "No swords?"

She smiled. "I didn't expect you'd need saving today, Sir Reginald. Last I heard you'd chased all the bandits off Biham."

"Hardly. Biham's got nothing worth smuggling, though. I'll never forget how you looked that day. Teeth bared, swords flying . . . I didn't know hands moved that fast."

Katana wrinkled her nose and shrugged, a peculiarly girlish gesture, and Eriksson's mind flashed back to 3119, when she was seventeen, and he'd nearly lost his life. *If Katana hadn't happened out of that gym at precisely the right moment, I'd have been sliced and diced by those smugglers*. Katana made hash of two men in little more than thirty seconds, probably less. Put the fear of God in *him*, too.

"What are you smiling at?"

Eriksson blinked back to attention. "Oh, nothing. Mind wanders a bit, years catching up, that's all." He saw her eyes skip to his cane, the hand clutching its brass head, and he looked through her eyes: at the age spots staining his hands, his swollen knuckles, the way his shoulders had rounded his upper torso into the beginnings of a question mark. "Not a pretty sight," he remarked lightly.

"We're both older."

"True. You've changed, and I don't mean just with the passage of years. What you are doing now, taking worlds, claiming them for the Combine . . . that's not the loyal woman I knew."

Her gaze never wavered. "We all change, Sir Reginald."

"No, despite your shifting allegiances, you haven't changed. You were a brash young thing at seventeen, and you're just as pig-headed at thirty-two. You've got guts, talent, determination . . . but most of all? You're *still* an angry, lost little girl."

Her bemused smile wilted. "You're being unfair, Sir Reginald."

"If anyone is being unfair, it's you. I've known you for a long time, Katana. The thing driving you hasn't changed one whit. You've never fit in. I didn't know you before your mother died, but you and your father had a parting of the ways about the time you met me, wasn't it?"

Now Katana made no pretense of hiding her anger and hurt. Her cheeks flushed copper with blood and emotion. "I didn't trade my father in for *you*, and I didn't jilt *you* for the Combine."

"No? Tell me, Katana, what does that?"—he flicked a finger at her Dragon's Fury patch—"that design, what does it stand for?"

Katana expelled a breath of surprise. "This is the Kurita dragon, only it's not quite the same. The circle's

made by the Dragon itself, not the Dragon contained within or by the circle. The black diamonds signify the three districts of the Combine, Benjamin, Pesht, and New Samarkand; the white for what's missing, the hole made when the Combine gave away the Dieron District. And then together the four diamonds make up the fifth element: the district lost to the Clans."

"Really? Are you quite sure that what's missing isn't *in you*?" He saw that shock quickly replaced her hurt. "Katana, we fought side by side for our *lives*. I sponsored your admission to Northwind Academy. I was honored to be at your side when you were made a prefect. But you're the one opening a gulf I can't bridge. I am a knight, and though The Republic may be crumbling around me, there are some things that must not stand," he said, and then, with a sudden ferocity added, "This path you're on will lead you to *destruction*, Katana, or you will destroy everything I hold dear in your wake. You have disgraced the trust our Republic has given you, and this shall not stand! This shall *not stand!*" With an angry gesture of dismissal, he pivoted on his left foot, jerking away, facing again toward the relentless sea. His right hip shrieked with pain, but he hardly felt it. He hurled his words into the wind. "I am old and I am broken, but I am *not* beaten. *You* may find it easy to discard honor, but I still have *mine*, by *God*, I still have *that!*"

Overhead, seabirds wheeled and screamed, and his heart banged wildly against his chest. He thought, grimly, that if he had a heart attack here and now, well, at least he'd gotten what ailed him off his chest. *And who to tell her if I don't?*

When she spoke, her voice was low and subdued. "The Combine must be made whole again."

He turned to face her. Anger made him brutal. "Because *you've* decided? Who are *you*, Katana? Your family's been disgraced; your nobility's a matter of history, not fact. And you are not the coordinator. Vincent Kurita has not declared a war."

"I fight in the Dragon's name."

"*Really?* Since when? Kurita is *silent*. And don't blame the outage; we haven't been blown back into the Stone Age. Kurita's silence means he neither condemns *nor* endorses you. You're on your own, Katana."

"And you, Sir Reginald?"

"I *will never* support you. But"—he dragged in a breath—"I will not speak out against you either . . . *unless* you invade Biham or cross into Prefecture II. If you do, then I *will* fight you."

"Then I would regret having to defeat you."

All at once, his flame of anger guttered and died. He looked away, his shoulders sagging. He felt very old. He looked down at his hand and saw that the fingers trembled. "Katana." His voice grew thick, and he had to clear his throat. "My dear, *why* are you here? For my blessing?"

"No." And then, for the first time, she faltered. "I . . . I was on my way . . . to my base at Ancha and I . . . I guess I just wanted to see you . . ."

"One last time?" He reached out, touched her cheek. Her eyes were very bright, and her skin was wet—though not with salt spray. An image swam before his mind's eye; of his little Rachel when she'd scraped her knee and how he'd cupped her cheek, told her that everything would be all right. But now, nothing would ever be right again.

It was almost too much for his old heart to bear. “Katana, if my daughter had lived, I would’ve been overjoyed for her to call you sister. But, my dear, I fear for you. I fear for us both. *Please*, Katana, please . . . don’t force me to become the agent of your death.”

He let his hand fall away and turned again toward the sea and setting sun. They stood awhile, side by side, as the sea stole land from beneath their feet by imperceptible degrees. Then he felt the brush of fingers on his right cheek and he heard the rasp of sand as she walked away.

He turned at the last possible second. She was atop the sloping dune once more, unmoving, her back to him. The setting sun painted the sand orange and bronzed her skin. His old heart hoped that she’d turn and come back to him—even as his reason knew she wouldn’t.

And, in this at least, she didn’t disappoint him.



Katana’s Journal

26 December 3134

Well, that hurt like hell. I don’t why I’m so surprised, though. What did I expect? That Sir Reginald would pat me on the head and tell me what a good, brave little girl I’ve turned out to be? Dumb.

And, of course, Sully noticed, damn it all. Let me have it as soon as I was aboard the DropShip. “Well, ain’t this a fine and pretty picture?”

I tried a smile that didn’t work. “That noticeable, huh?”

Sully blew out like a horse. He’s a bear of a man: thick-necked, barrel-chested, a little grizzled because he’s always got a five o’clock shadow, even at ten in the morning, and a rich Scottish burr that makes me think of crackling wood fires, smoky whiskey, green heaths. He still wore his cook’s apron, and he smelled like good steamed rice: rich and nutty. “Your face gets any longer you gonna need a wheelbarrow to cart around your chin. What’s on your mind, girl?”

So I told him. He listened. Sully’s good that way, always has been, and it probably explains why his bar on Northwind was always packed. The best bartenders are just a step away from being psychiatrists, I guess. Anyway, when I started up Dragon’s Fury and recruited my Brotherhood, there he was at the head of the line, asking where to sign. So now I take my best cook everywhere. My one failing—but he’s *that* good.

Sully gave his chin a thoughtful rasp with his nails and said, “All right. Now we could talk about why you even bothered going to see Sir Reginald . . .”

“I’d rather not.” I’d been playing with my breakfast, pushing natto beans around with my bowl of rice, and now I balanced the tips of black lacquered chopsticks on their holder. “There’s really no point.”

“Oh, there’s a point, Kat, there’s *salways* a point.” Sully gave me a shrewd going-over with those baby blues of his. “But that ain’t all that’s bothering you, is it?”

I shook my head, sighed, picked up my teacup and took a sip. "Dragon's Fury's in trouble," I said flatly. "We've reached the limit of our available resources, and we simply don't have any way to stretch ourselves further. It's not just men; it's materiel, supplies, *everything*. If one of those occupied worlds got it in its head to mount a rebellion, I'm not sure we'd quash it, or get there in time. Crawford said that unless we secure stockpiles, and I'm talking lots and lots of weapons, hardware, fighters, 'Mechs, we're going nowhere in a hurry."

Sully grunted. "Thought it might be something like that. People talk, you hear things if you've got your ear to the ground. And that Andre Crawford, I know he's one of those agent-types, O5P, and I don't usually take to that cloak-and-dagger stuff. But he's got a head, and he's loyal. If he says it's so . . ."

"Then it's so."

"Couldn't a said it better. But what about that McCain fella, and Miss Viki? You heard from them yet?" When I shook my head, he said, "Well, now, Kat, I'm not one to lord it over ya, tell you that I didn't like it one bit what you did, ordering them Junction-way, dealing with them lowlifes, and you never no minding what I said, 'cause if there's one thing a man knows what keeps a pub is that them criminal-types, they's dicey. I told you from the very beginning, Kat, only you're a stubborn one."

"Gee, don't hold back, Sully. Tell me what you really think."

"Now, don't you go mouthing your betters." Sully wagged a thick finger. "You got to face up to the unpleasant facts, Kat, or else what you got'll be gone. You've done things a sight faster'n better than even Theodore Kurita, Bob's your uncle."

Bob? Sully says the strangest things. "It's not a contest, Sully."

"Just you listen to what old Sully's saying, because I'll tell you something else. I don't see the coordinator, all hot and fevered-like, roaring down in a DropShip and clapping you by the hand and saying what a good job you done. You keep saying you want the Dragon to wake up, am I right?"

I opened my mouth, but Sully breezed on. "'Course I'm right. Only maybe you ain't figured that he's awake, and just don't care. That's part of why you ain't letting well enough alone, is 'cause you want the coordinatorto care."

"Look, I won't argue that it'd be nice for the coordinator to sanction what I'm doing. Maybe then I'd get some support. God knows, I need it. But, Sully, The Republic's a grand experiment that's failed, and that's all there is to it."

"With a little help from you."

"And you think I'd have gotten so many people to follow me if they hadn't wanted to? Look at me. I don't have millions of troops. I'm not pulverizing worlds into subatomic particles. But people want to belong to something greater than themselves . . ."

"Like you?"

Heat crawled up my neck. Sully's better than a sensor that way; he always knows how to push my buttons. "And you, I might add. Why else join up with the Brotherhood? Because you worry I won't get a square meal?"

“Well, you wouldn’t’ve.” Sully held up a meaty paw. “Kat, you don’t have to convince me, girl. I’m only saying that you’ve snatched plenty. Now . . . rest easy for awhile. Count yerself lucky you’ve still got your head screwed on proper.”

We left it at that, but, damn it all, if Sully hasn’t hit the nail on the head—*again*. I’ve never felt at home anywhere except the Combine, ever. Oh, sure, my father was governor on Ancha. But he’d been Combine before; the Dragon ran in his veins, I know it did. It wasn’t just bad luck or routine timing that his first marriage went down faster than a DropShip with no engines, because what did he do? He married my mother, Rachel Jefferson: musicologist, specialist in all things Japanese and Combine.

But I got my first taste of what home, a real home in the Combine, could be when I was eleven. That’s when I met Uncle Kan’s brother, Oniji Otome. I had gone to return Uncle’s swords. I remember that Otome-*san* seemed very old, even then, with deeply lined features and his brother’s gray-blue eyes. He listened without comment as Mom told him how Uncle Kan had died. Then I presented the swords, which we’d placed upon a special, pure white silk pillow, because white is the color of death. I remember being very nervous, worried that I’d mess up the bow because I had to kneel, put the pillow down, then hunker down into a sitting *rei* and get both hands on the ground and do the bow just right.

Otome-*san* didn’t say anything for a long time. My face was down, my eyes on the pillow, and I inspected every inch of those swords: the *subas* of gold and silver enamel, with their exquisite detail of a mantis eating a cricket but unaware that a golden oriole eyed *him* for its dinner; the deep cobalt blue leather wrap of both swords mirrored in lacquered sheaths of the same color.

At last, Otome-*san* commanded me to rise. We were close enough that I caught a faint, sweet licorice smell of star anise on his breath. He said, “You mourn Kan Otome?”

“Yes, Otome-*san*. I loved Uncle Kan very much.”

“And your father? Do you love him, too?”

“No.”

“And why not? He is your father.”

“And you are the brother of the man my father killed. Don’t you want revenge?”

“Each man carries the seeds of his undoing. Your father does not require my help for them to take root. Besides, you are doing such a good job.”

Heat rose up my neck, and I’m sure I fidgeted. “I don’t understand, Otome-*san*.”

“I see only your mother here.”

“That’s because he’s too ashamed to face you.”

“You are mistaken. Your father discovered a fundamental truth. A brother is the most fearsome and mortal enemy of all. Your father did not wish to shame me further for my brother’s misdeeds.”

“Misdeeds?” I was thoroughly confused. “My father *forced* Uncle to . . .”

“He forced my brother to face his dishonor and then he helped reclaim his honor as *hiskaishakunin* . . . I

knew your father well, *Musume* , my Daughter. Trust that I speak the truth.” He pinned me with a look that seemed to hold me by the ankles and give me a good shake to see what fell out. “You have great *kokoro* , Daughter, a fine spirit. But there is also *gaijin* , a stranger, in you. In that you share much with your father, *hai* ? Akira-sandiscovered a traitor, a man who was *gaijin* , and cut him from his life. Your father knows that the act alone does not bring healing. Only time does this. You are very young yet, but this is something you must do, *Musume* , else you will never find peace.”

In the end, Otome-sangave me Uncle Kan’s *swakazashi* . No accident: it’s the sword Uncle Kan used to cut out his guts. *Gaijin* , I guess, because the sword’s message is clearly pounded into that *tabu* , the one that shows the bird stalking the mantis that eats the cricket. Just another name for that universal law: Watch your back.

Because you never really know what’s going to happen next.



Two Forks, Junction

Benjamin Military District, Draconis Combine

27 December 3134

Four months, waiting for something to happen. Four months of crummy food, crappy pay and a lumpy mattress in a rat-infested tenement block. Four months of Saturday night shoot-'em-ups, when Dr. Matt McCain was throwing in central lines and opening them real wide for some idiot who'd scored some really bad shit the week before and still couldn't get it through his thick skull that McCain didn't need to see him again, like ever . But Two Forks was that kind of town. *Yakuza* territory: lots of drugs, lots of sex and, being south of the equator, hot enough that garbage soured in an hour and tempers spiked to the boiling point.

Saturday night had been bad. *Really* bad. McCain stared at his feet, watched water spiral a gurgling funnel down the drain. *Four lousy months on this toilet of a planet, and no closer now than when I volunteered for this crazy mission* . And he was sure a month ago that he'd finally caught a break. McCain fumbled for soap and lathered. Viki had it all figured, she'd said: reliable cutout, an assassin with a reputation.

Except whoever this assassin guy was, he had lousy aim, because McCain'd really *worked* at putting the save on the kid. Oh, it was the *right* kid because of the tattoo: gold chain-link around the kid's right wrist. Only none of the kid's *syakuza* buddies had shown up, kind of putting the kibosh on that old saw about honor among thieves.

There was, of course, another possibility. The party he was so very interested in meeting might be checking out his cover story: down-and-out drunk booted off New Samarkand for malpractice, reduced to grunge work in the armpit of the galaxy. But, right kid or not, they'd screwed up somehow. A month was plenty long to check him out.

McCain towed off, shaved, combed out his ratty mane of black hair and shrugged into civvies: worn jeans, black tee. On his way out, he backhanded a wave to the receptionist, an attractive, bespectacled redhead in her late twenties. She waved back but McCain could tell she'd be just as happy if their next

view of Junction was the planet receding in their rearview, and fast. Outside, the heat smacked his face, and by the time he'd taken five steps, sweat beaded on his forehead. By the time he made it to his hoverbike, his shirt was soaked through.

His bike was at the far end of the lot in a blot of shade thrown by one forlorn-looking, droopy maple next to a picnic table where hospital personnel ate lunch and griped about how crummy their lives were. He'd gotten the secondhand bike as soon as he set foot on Junction, although calling the bike "used" was a joke. The thing rode like it was held together with chewing gum and baling wire. But it got him where he needed to go.

Except this morning. He twisted the key in the ignition, pulled out the fuel petcock, thumbed down the starter and listened as the engine *rrr-rrr-rrred*. He checked the kill switch; he pulled out the choke; he cursed a blue streak. No go.

Then, a midnight blue hovercar—four-door sedan, tinted windows, mirror-perfect chrome—hissed to a stop alongside. The back door slid open. A ball of cold air ballooned out, followed by a man in a black, crewneck tee and gray sharkskin trousers. His skin was sallow and he had very small, almond-shaped eyes set in a flat box of a face. Another man joined him: identical in dress but much shorter, closer to McCain in height, and so muscle-bound that McCain thought the guy's biceps would rip the seams of his shirt if the guy sneezed. McCain's eyes dropped to the men's right wrists, and suddenly his heart kicked into overdrive. Because there was the tattoo: gold chain-link, circlet of a black dragon against red background.

The muscled one said, "Need a lift, Doc?"

"Naw." McCain waved him off. "Thanks. But if you've got jumper cables . . ."

"Naw, we don't got cables," said Muscle. "What we got is a nice cool car, good stereo. Take you anywhere you want to go."

"I'll be okay."

"Naw, Doc." And this time McCain saw a glint of blue steel. Maybe a pistol; maybe a nice, pointy *torigato* designed to make shish kebab out of his heart. "You *really* want a ride," said Muscle.

"Well," said McCain, "when you put it *that* way."

They blindfolded him. McCain tried keeping track of twists and turns. They were climbing, and that meant they were headed east. The only thing east of the city was the lake, and ritzy estates beaded the coastline like pearls on a string, homes of the very rich and filthy rich. McCain figured this was really good, or really bad. Good, since the tattoos meant these were the *right yakuza*, but really bad if they'd figured out that he wasn't who he said he was.

As soon as they let him out, and even before they tugged off the blindfold, McCain knew they were at the lake because of the smell: wet and sweet with lavender and green grass. One look at the estate and McCain knew something else: filthy rich. The mansion looked like something out of ancient history: a three-tiered wedding cake of a castle with bone white mortar walls and gray-tiled roofs edged with elaborate iron scrollwork.

Inside, two men, both in black and with the chain-link tattoo, materialized out of twin shadowed alcoves set right and left of the main entry. Muscle said something in a burst of rapid Japanese and got a reply that made his face darken. He turned to McCain. "This way."

Muscle led McCain through a labyrinth of halls and screened rooms to a room set well back in the house. The room's *shoji* was shut tight, and two more guards flanked the entrance. At Muscle's approach, they sketched quick bows then slid open the *shoji*. Muscle ducked in and motioned for McCain to follow.

McCain smelled the boy before he saw him: clotted blood and sour sweat. The boy, not much older than fifteen, lay on a low futon, a sheet pulled up to his neck. His eyes were shut and he moaned periodically. A woman knelt, mopping the boy's sweat from his forehead then wringing out the rag in water from an enameled basin by her knees, and McCain figured he didn't need to be a rocket scientist to get this one, either. "Jesus, you've got to be kidding. That boy needs a hospital."

Muscle, his voice like flint. "You got to work here."

Tabletop surgery definitely wasn't on McCain's agenda. "What happened?"

"He was ambushed a day ago, coming home from school. We think it was *Kabuki-monoe*." At McCain's perplexed expression, Muscle said, "*Ronin*. Street punks and dealers carving out their territory. Anyway, *whoever* he was . . . he got away."

"So why haven't you taken this boy to a hospital?"

"No can do. He had bodyguards, but they're dead. Anyone that good can get into a hospital, no problem. You got to take care of him here."

"Look, I'm just an ER doc, strictly treat and street. I . . ."

"Look, you don't do it, I got to kill you. You seen the place. But you put the save on him, I don't kill you. You do for me, I do for you, you know?"

"What if he dies?"

"You got to ask?"

Okay, this had *not* been the plan. Kneeling, McCain peeled the sheet from the boy's body. A swath of rust-colored gauze the size of McCain's hand covered the boy's right side. Gingerly, McCain lifted away tape and then groaned. The bullet had punched a ragged, fleshy hole just above and to the right of the boy's navel. The boy writhed just then, and a squirt of plum-colored, half-clotted blood dribbled down the boy's flank. McCain looked at Muscle. "I suppose it's too much to hope there's an exit wound."

"Naw. Bullet's still in there."

"Great. How long has he been out?"

"Since last night."

"Ah, Jesus." Oily sweat slicked the kid's face and chest. He felt the boy's forehead. Burning up, but when McCain pressed down on the kid's cold, white-gray nail beds, they were slow to refill with blood.

“Look, this is bad. You guys waited too long.”

“That’s why you operate here.”

“Yeah? With what? My trusty pocket knife?”

“Anything you need, we got. We got a clinic.”

“So where’s your doctor?”

“Dead,” said Muscle in a flat tone that suggested McCain*really* didn’t want to know how. “You’re the runner-up, Doc.”

“Well, now’s the perfect time to just say no.” McCain pushed to his knees. “At the risk of sounding hackneyed, I have no intention of running, and I will not run if nominated.”

Muscle’s face was grim. “Look, you don’t do it, I kill you. You do it, and he dies, I won’t be dancing in the aisles, but you stay alive.”

“I thought you said you’d kill me.”

Muscle shrugged. “I incentivized.”

McCain didn’t like it. But he did it anyway. Like he had a choice.

Two Forks, Junction

27 December 3134

Viki Drexel swayed along in a hoverbus. The vehicle was jammed with too many people crammed into too small a space, the overheated air smelling of cigarettes, sour rice and sweaty feet. Drexel inhaled, regretted it, thought: *Oh, man, what can go wrong next?* McCain was gone; snatched, but by whom and where to? She sure didn’t know, and unless someone dropped a helpful clue or two her way, she was stuck.

Nothing was going right. They’d slipped across the border between Prefecture III and the Combine, their JumpShip winking in and out at a pirate point. They had a mission and even kind of a plan. So far, other than McCain working himself catatonic and her pushing paper all day, their time hadn’t been particularly well spent.

On Junction, she was just Dixie Lever, catchy anagram, because she couldn’t afford to be anyone *but* Lever. Viki Drexel wasn’t notorious, but she wasn’t exactly unknown. Anyone with half his brain on life support would’ve put it together eventually, even if she *had* dyed her hair red from her God-given brown. All those stories about how her *Shockwave* had made short work of a munitions battery on Ancha. She could just see it now: someone giving her a double take and then, *Oh, that Viki Drexel.*

Matt McCain was just Matt McCain: doc and all-around stand-up, gutsy, nice guy. He’d wielded a scalpel; she’d done all the complicated stuff: securing the cutout, contracting the hit man, specifying the target. She’d thought for sure they’d nailed it a month ago when McCain pulled the save on that one kid who had gotten, well, *aerated*. And had McCain give her an earful about *that one: I’m a doctor, not a gangster!* Well, maybe, except they were dealing with gangsters, and monkey see, monkey do. They

couldn't very well go knock on theoyabun's door:*Excuse me, but we're from Dragon's Fury, and we're making a tour of your neighborhood and wanted to know if you and the missus had anything you'd like to donate, say, a couple of 'Mechs, maybe some troops . . .* She wanted to meet the idiot who'd dreamed up this harebrained scheme, maybe shake his hand, buy him a drink. Problem was:*She was the idiot.*

Face it, toots. You blew it. So what you going do now, wiseass?

A little less than a klick from her place, she got off, squirting like a wet watermelon seed through the bus' open doors. She always walked the last part, keeping her eyes peeled, the *tick-tick-tick* of her heels against cracked concrete keeping time. As she rounded the corner toward her building, she glanced left—and froze. There was a street vendor, a woman by the looks of it, hawking noodles and fresh tamago.*But it's the wrong time of day unless . . .*

At Drexel's approach, the vendor, a short lumpy woman with a flat face, gave her a pleasant smile. "Help you, miss?"

"Yes," said Drexel, heart fluttering in her throat. "Are your eggs good?"

"Oh, yes. Very good, very fresh. I make up nice tamago." Drexel watched as the woman cracked eggs, whisked them with soy sauce and sugar, drizzled the mixture on a rectangular, cast-iron omelet pan, and deftly flipped the omelet three times before sliding the piping hot treat onto foil. "There," she said, sealing the packet. Then, reaching beneath her cart, she brought out a paper sack. "And maybe you like some good eggs for later on, nice hard-boiled eggs."

Drexel practically ran up the stairs, the bag of hard-boiled eggs in her left hand, the slim, still-warm foil packet in her right. A quick glance at her door confirmed that the red hair she'd placed on the knob that morning was still in place. Satisfied, she pushed open the door, flipped on the light—and stopped, cold.

Her holovid was on. A disk was squared on the table.

Carefully, Drexel put the foil packet and sack of eggs on a square, rickety chair by the entrance. Then she fished a pistol from her purse, screwed on a silencer, thumbed off the safety. Slipping out of her heels, Drexel edged down a short hall in stocking feet, high-stepping over the creaky floorboard near the bathroom. The bathroom door was half open, and she wasn't sure if she'd left it that way or not. At the jamb, she dropped to a low crouch, straight-armed her pistol, kicked open the door. The door banged open on squalling hinges, and Drexel was through, whipping down and around, sweeping with the pistol from side to side. No one there. But—her eyes narrowed—the shower curtain was pulled, and she *knew* that was wrong. Maybe someone *there* . . .

A slash of shadow, and then she was firing, *bap-bap-bap* ! Curtain dancing, shredding, and she kept expecting a scream, but all she got was the *crack-crack-crack-thwack* of metal splintering tile.

Oh, for heaven's sake. Disgusted, Drexel pulled the curtain aside, and the mystery of the shadow was solved. It was her own, thrown in stark relief by the bare bulb just behind and above her head. There was no one in the bathtub, and a whole lot of smashed tile. The bathroom reeked of burned cordite and singed rayon. "Good work, Drexel," she said. "You killed the shower curtain."

She searched the rest of the apartment, didn't kill anything else, went back to the holovid and stared at the disk for a full three minutes. *The Knave blew away a bunch of police, and all of it wired to a playing card.* Probably whoever'd been here could do the same with a holodisk. Only one way to find

out . . . She slid the disk across the table with her right index finger until one corner jutted over the desk. Gingerly picked up the disk. Waited to blow up. When nothing happened, she slipped the disk into her player, still expecting *aka-boom* .

What she got was *aclick* , and then audio. “Good afternoon, Miss Drexel.” The voice was smooth, male, sensual. “Lovely doing business with you. You know how to reach me again if needed, but I doubt that now. Your friend, Dr. McCain, likely has his hands full. Only a word of caution, Miss Drexel: Watch out for those eggs. Most are fresh, but every now and again, you get one that’s gone a bit off. A little . . . *bad*. And the funny thing is . . . you just can’t predict when a bad egg might turn up.” The machine clicked again, and then silence.

He called her *Drexel* . She’d never given her name. *That means he knows who I am. But how? No one in the Fury knows we’re here; Katana’s the only one . . .*

And what was that weird stuff about eggs? Drexel retrieved the sack, took it to her sink, opened it, and peeked inside. There were six eggs. After a brief hesitation, she plucked one out and tapped it against the edge of her sink. She waited again for *ka-boom* . Instead, there was a *crispsnap-crunch* , and then she was peeling eggshell away from hard white.

It was on the third egg, done in black; an ancient Terran trick with alum and vinegar. Two words: *He’s in*

McCain, *in!* Finally, a break. Still . . . a bad egg: *Every now and again, you get one that’s gone a bit off . . .*

“Gone bad,” she said aloud. “And no telling when, or where. Or who.”

Junction Nadir Jump Point

Benjamin Military District, Draconis Combine

4 January 3135

Marcus said, “And don’t we look like the cat that ate the canary?”

Oh, Marcus was peevish again. Understandable. He’d badgered Marcus to accelerate enough so he could have a proper shower and wash away Junction’s filth. Now, weightless once more, Jonathan felt wonderful. His hair was still wet, and as he turned a lazy somersault, water pearls drifted like beads from a broken necklace. “What’s the matter, Marcus? Jealous?”

“Absolutely not,” said Marcus, stiffly. “But when I killed, it wasn’t a game.”

“Oh, Marcus, lighten up! Have a little *fun!*” Jonathan stretched with a catlike purr. “We have reason to be very pleased. I got in some practice, and we were nicely rewarded.”

“You know we don’t need the money.”

This was true. But Jonathan enjoyed his job in all its permutations. Oh, all right, strangling was a bit of a bore. After a few gurgles and splutters, wasn’t much to it. So, he cheated. Let up a tad to make it last. Gave new meaning to the term *taking a breather* .

Jonathan thought it best to change the subject. “So what’s the chatter?” Civilian JumpShip captains were the biggest gossips in the known universe. Marcus’ people knew how to exploit this because channel chatter was also a magnificent way to disseminate misinformation.

“Some gossip about Sakamoto,” Marcus began reluctantly. “Troop movements, maybe incursions into Atlas space. The only thing solid is that there are DCMS supply convoys moving in on Homam and Matar.”

“Along the border with Prefecture III and within spitting distance of Proserpina . . . you think he’s after our girl?”

“Maybe.”

“Well,*that* won’t do.”

“We’ll go around them.” Marcus outlined their captain’s plan: steer clear of Homam and go in at Sadalbari. “And since we’re headed in that general direction . . .”

“We’ll drop in. Excellent. But let’s muck up the works,” Jonathan said. “Have the captain slip in some comm chatter, very casual, *that* he’s heard Katana’s people are flitting about the Combine. But make *sure* he mentions Ludwig and Junction so our dear Bhatia will send agents to investigate.” *Else why go to the trouble of warning the intrepid Miss Drexel?* “And speaking of Bhatia, Brother, I think it’s high time we sent along that little token of our appreciation to the esteemed director.” Jonathan gave a slow, lazy smile. “Don’t you?”

10

Imperial City, Luthien

10 January 3135

What never failed to impress Emi was how well Luthien and, especially, Imperial City had been reconstructed at the end of the Jihad. The reconstruction had taken the better part of twenty years, not because of the Combine’s inefficiency but because Jabuka teak trees took half a century to reach maturity. Unity Palace rose from the ashes, elegant yet profoundly simple: a series of seven airy structures juxtaposed lengthwise in a near sawtooth. The azimuth of every structure faced nineteen degrees to the southeast as ancient Terran tradition demanded, so that the giants *shoji* might be pushed aside for the coordinator to view the harvest moon in autumn as well as take advantage of winter’s sunlight and summer’s cooling breezes.

The Throne Room—a hall, really—was easily twenty meters wide and thirty meters long, with the Dragon Throne occupying the far end. Decorative scrolls, *kakemono*, hung on either wall, depicting idealized representations of Luthien’s landscape: snowcapped black crags, rushing waterfalls, swaying willows. There were no chairs and only scarlet tatami mats upon which a supplicant might stand or kneel. The only furniture in the room was the Dragon Throne.

She had been in this room a thousand times over but still, when she stared up at the throne resting on a raised dais three steps above a swath of scarlet tatami, Emi was awed to immobility. The Dragon Throne was carved teak done in an orange-gold-lacquered openwork lattice featuring high-relief carvings of

five-clawed dragons swirling in undulating loops and curls across the back and down the throne's arms. She knew that the five-clawed dragon had not always represented the coordinator; in ancient Terran times, the Chinese had used the dragons with five claws, the number representing nobility. Rulers of ancient Japan had favored the Chrysanthemum Throne, though no one really knew what the throne had looked like—only that the *kiku* was the emperor's coat of arms, and the emperor was the high priest of the Shinto religion. Perhaps Shiro Kurita had borrowed emblems and symbols that he thought represented the power the coordinator held over the Combine; or perhaps he just liked dragons. Certainly a dragon was much more awe-inspiring than a flower.

The Dragon Throne was not very high, only one hundred and eighty centimeters, and it was perhaps half as wide as it was long. A gold silk cushion formed the seat, and a matching bolster snuggled against each arm, providing a rest for the coordinator's arms and elbows. A matching carved footstool, three steps high, allowed the coordinator to mount his throne. At either side of the throne stood two vertical censers, capped with gold; a coil of white smoke rose in a pencil-thin curl, and Emi caught the fragrance of sandalwood. In all these details, the throne was an exact replica of the original.

But this wasn't so with the dragon mural just behind the throne. The deep, dark ebony of a polished slab of solid obsidian dominated an entire wall. The Kurita dragon lay at its heart, precisely centered: a perfect disc of deep, bloodred carnelian spanned four meters and was edged by a narrow rim of rich rose-gold that tricked the eyes and made the disc seem to leap out from the ebony background. The scales of the dragon were etched with gold; the eye was a lump of amethyst; the dragon's teeth were the purest ivory. Yet, beautiful as this was, her eyes drifted over not the Dragon, or the enamel of Terra with its blue oceans and green continents, but to the representation of the Combine itself.

Though they, the Combine and the Dragon, are one and the same. Her keen eyes picked out what they always had, ever since she was a little girl. Some of the jewels were missing. There was no mistake; she'd double-checked with the old records, and an entire swath of territory, the Dieron District as well as disputed territories and holdings of the Federated Suns that had taken a bite from the Combine's flank, was missing.

A voice sounded at her right hand. "Yes, they are beautiful. We like looking at them ourselves."

Smiling, Emi cocked her head to look up at the coordinator. "I would think you'd find them easy to overlook, *Tono*. You see them nearly every day."

"Ah, you must mean that the more often an object of value and great beauty is seen, the more quickly do those same qualities recede until they are not seen at all." A mischievous grin made it all the way from the coordinator's lips to his remarkably clear hazel eyes. "In other words, familiarity breeds contempt."

Emi had to bite on the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing out loud, though the coordinator clearly guessed she was having trouble because his grin turned into a broad smile, and his eyes twinkled. Despite his years and the deepening lines marring his features, Emi had yet to find the smallest trace of *agethere*—no telltale milky rim encircling the iris. *As it should be, for the Dragon must possess clear sight.* Yet this was more difficult to believe as every day passed and The Republic fell apart—and the coordinator said nothing and did nothing but dress in his fine clothes. An uncharitable thought, perhaps, but true nonetheless. Emi's eyes clicked over the coordinator's outfit: his sumptuous brocaded jacket of lotus flowers woven in vibrant red and gold; a dragon clasp of obsidian enameled with a sparkling ruby red inlay; an equally princely *hakama* of the finest black silk. Even his black *tabi* socks were shot through with goldthread dragons.

Her thoughts must have shown on her face because the coordinator's expression became grave. "Well?"

Remember, he is first and foremost the Dragon incarnate. Emi chose her words with care. “How clearly the Coordinator sees, registers, *understands* all. And yet, does not the Coordinator fulfill the very axiom the Coordinator disparages?”

“We cannot fathom your meaning, Lady.”

“Your attire, *Tono*. The Dragon doesn’t need to advertise his power, only use it.”

“Ah, that. Wise words. We expect no less from the Keeper of the House Honor.” He paused. “Perhaps we merely wish to remain valuable in our people’s eyes.”

“Then as Keeper . . . is not the Dragon’s first duty to be that which is not? I do not recall ever seeing so grandly appointed a hub.”

The coordinator’s expression remained mild. “From you, we will forgive a great deal, Lady, and we thank you for your concern. On the other hand, we wonder if you’ve spent as much time studying that which lies below as that which resides in the clouds of theory, philosophy and imagination.”

And takethat. Emi’s cheeks flared with embarrassment. Of course, she knew her history, and knew that chariots and wheels and hubs could be very decorative and yet functional. “My apologies, *Tono*; I have been too familiar.”

“No, you haven’t. We know what the people call us: the Peacock. All style and no substance, not a fang in the Coordinator’s head.” The coordinator made a dismissive gesture. “What of it? House Kurita still stands.”

Ah, and had the coordinator put a subtle emphasis upon that word, *still*? She thought so, and a pang of sadness bit into Emi’s heart.

The coordinator must have read her emotions because he said, “All right, Lady, all this talk about the Dragon this, the Dragon that. Why don’t you . . . cut to the chase?”

She smiled as he’d meant her to, though it made what she had to say next all the more difficult. “*Tono*, the Combine hasn’t moved to reclaim any of its lost worlds. There is talk that the Dragon is more concerned with his looks than his honor.”

“Old news. Tell us something new. Tell us,” the coordinator continued, as if the thought had just occurred, “what you think of Katana Tormark.”

Emi was caught off guard. She’d been prepared to talk about the warlords, and Sakamoto, in particular. The coordinator’s son had told her all about it; she and Theodore Kurita shared a special, private bond no wife or father could replicate. After a pause to gather her wits, Emi said, “Katana Tormark is brave and aggressive. She’s acted with honor, even before she began to claim worlds in the Dragon’s name.”

The coordinator gave a dry laugh. “Yes, well, better late than never. And her troops?”

“Her troops are reported to be quite humane. That can only come if their leader is, as well.”

“I agree. What do you think of the woman herself?”

The coordinator's sudden shift from third person to first didn't escape Emi's notice, and her eyes narrowed. The move was a signal: *Drop the formalities and go for it.* Emi said, "My honest opinion is that Katana Tormark is a psychological refugee and very much like a recent convert. Her mother's dead; she hasn't seen her father in almost twenty years. She was one of the best and brightest stars in The Republic's heaven, but she's turned her face—and her loyalties—to the Dragon."

The coordinator was nodding, a finger resting on his chin as he thought over what she'd said. "But you said that she's like a convert."

"That's right. Has the Coordinator ever noticed that the zealots are not the ones born to the religion, but those who convert? That's Katana to a tee. She's more Combine than many *in* the Combine; from what our intelligence tells us, she eats, drinks, thinks and lives in the manner of the samurai. Honestly, I think Katana's trying, very hard, to find her place within the universe."

"And only the universe?"

"No. I think she's looking for a family, a place to belong. She's an orphan in many, many ways, so it's not surprising that she might idealize a way of life or *aperson*"—she paused to give that last word added weight then continued—"that *orwho* will be the parent she hungers for. And like all parents, when the pedestal crumbles . . ."

"It's a long way down." Then the coordinator said something quite extraordinary, something that caught Emi completely by surprise. "Then, does it not behoove us to care for such a lost child as much as I cherish you? There have been many jewels, many black pearls lost to the ages, like the mural above the throne—beautiful, but lacking. I am determined that this should stop, and very soon. After all, a crown—and a home, large or small—is only as valuable as its jewels, new and old." The coordinator held Emi's gaze. "Don't you agree, daughter of mine own heart?"

A lump of emotion balled in Emi's throat, and she couldn't speak for a moment. "Yes, Father," she whispered, finally. The coordinator's face blurred as her eyes pooled with sudden tears. "I do."

11

Salt Plains, on the outskirts of Armitage, Ancha

Prefecture III, Republic of the Sphere

13 January 3135

Usually, *Chu-sa* Andre Crawford was a pretty nice guy, with sparkling emerald green eyes and a curling mane of hair as deeply red as his *Black Knight*, "Phantom." At the moment, though, Crawford was in the kind of crappy mood when you really, *really* didn't want to cross him. So maybe it was a good thing that he was in his *Black Knight* because, in a cockpit, no one can hear you swear. Or see you sweat.

Crawford was doing plenty of both. He was miserable *and* angry *and* broiling. The outside temp was a blistering forty-five C. His cooling vest was performing at only thirty percent efficiency because he'd rerouted power to keep his circuits from frying and his 'Mech from freezing—kind of a perverse little oxymoron. He felt oily and dirty; even his couch was damp. He'd been chugging electrolyte replacement fluids by the liter every hour, something he hated doing because the potassium made the lemony

concoction taste like liquid aluminum. And now, *sha-zaam!* He had to pee something fierce only he couldn't because, well, honestly, he was kind of busy, what with trying to track down the enemy before the enemy found him.

So where are they? Crawford squinted at his infrared. Big waste of effort: As hot as a BattleMech got, the salt plains were hotter. His sensor was a monotonous red blob. Sighing, Crawford squinted out his ferroglass canopy and saw two things, one that he expected and another he didn't like. The first was the plains: a featureless pan of bone white salt, the remains of an ancient sea. Unfortunately, the pan wasn't flat. If it had been, finding their enemy would've been a piece of cake because there'd have been nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. As the briny seawater had evaporated, the residue hadn't dried flat but rippled into uneven belts of calcium and sodium salts mounded into rock-hard hummocks. The plains themselves were ringed on three sides by rust-colored cliffs and studded with rock behemoths that seemed to bob on the white hardpan like icebergs. The flats ended in a bluff that, in turn, became a shifting, orange, sand-choked desert. There was no vegetation, and no water hereabouts. Above, the sky was a hard, steel blue, unmarred by anything save a lone bird that was so far away it looked like a black bead.

But it's what he *didn't* see that made him swear again. His eyes flicked up and right to the only thing on his HUD that was of any use out here: seismic distortion tracking and his Beagle. He looked, did a double take, and then swore like a sailor. "Chinn, where the *hell* are you?"

A click in his helmet, and a voice, hairy with static: "A klick west of your position, minus thirty-five, eight o'clock."

"Ex-ACT-ly! And where are you *supposed* to be?"

Chinn's annoyance was palpable even through the channel fuzz. "Your left flank, and that's precisely where I am."

"But not over a klick distant. What are you going to do if I take fire? Come roaring to the rescue? By the time you haul ass, I've taken major hits."

"Look," Chinn began, and stopped. Crawford had a mental image of the petite woman, sweat dripping from her exposed arms and legs, biting her lip, something Chinn did when she was angry. He heard her sigh. "Okay, you're right. I guess I was hanging back because, honestly, I think they've given us the slip. I don't know about you, but I'm roasting in here. Let's pack it in."

Unbelievable. Crawford's jaw went slack. Sure, there had been talk. How Chinn wasn't really herself anymore. How Chinn wouldn't pursue and close on Republic forces but hung back. Oh, sure, she went with the speed of heat when they tangled with anyone else. Since Katana had transferred Chinn to Proserpina—wagging tongues about that one, too—Crawford hadn't had much opportunity to test the diminutive woman's mettle until today. They'd been at this for two days, and he *did not* like what he'd seen so far. *And if Katana won't listen to reason, then I'll just have to sit on her until she does.*

"Listen, Chinn, I don't know what's going on with you, but this is serious business. Let's be very clear about this. *I* am in charge of this mission, and *only* I will decide when it's time to turn back. Right now, heat or no heat, we're not leaving until we hunt these people . . ."

The blare of an alarm cut off his tirade, and Crawford jerked his attention back to his sensors. "Oh, Jesus!"

“Incoming!” Chinn shouted. “Crawford, you’ve got incoming! And I’m getting movement just beyond . . . !”

But Crawford stopped listening because he saw it—no, *them*, too. First there was the swarm of six snub-nosed missiles cutting a seam in the sky, and then, in the next instant, a Republic Balac Strike VTOL rocketing up from its hiding place just beyond the bluff and arcing away in a scream of rotor wash. Then, there was movement on his left, and he swung the torso of his *Black Knight* around to see this new threat: a slate-gray *Panther* darting from the cover of a towering rust-red monolith protruding from the dead salt sea like a thick, severed thumb. There was a blinding blue flash as an azure bolt of PPC fire spurted from the *Panther*’s right arm.

“On my way!” Chinn shouted. “Hang on, Andre, I’m coming!”

She was too far away to be much help. She knew that. Crawford knew that. If the *Panther* didn’t kill him, the missiles would, PDQ; and if *they* didn’t, then the VTOL would swing around for another attack run, let loose with both racks this time and finish the job. Kind of whittled down the options right there.

Training and instincts took over. Quick as thought, Crawford spun right and hunkered into a crouch as the plasma bolt cut a bright gash in the superheated air just above his cockpit. *And the enemy of my enemy is my friend*. Whirling left, Crawford put on a burst of speed, the massive legs of his ’Mech pistoning, shattering rock and salt. He drove his *Black Knight* dead on for the *Panther* and anyone watching would’ve thought he was insane. Except now the missiles were right on his tail, and he was headed straight for the *Panther*. *And you don’t have any choice now, big boy, you got to fire*. Thumbing the kill button on his right joystick, Crawford dodged right, twisted, then blasted six laser bursts at the incoming missiles. At the same moment, a hail of eight missiles bulleted past his cockpit, followed by a series of muted explosions Crawford didn’t see but heard, and he knew: the *Panther* had fired and destroyed the incoming spread—not to help Crawford but to save his own butt.

It had all happened in less than ten seconds, and Crawford was already moving again, pushing his *Black Knight* to close the distance to the *Panther*. His enemies had the element of surprise, but Crawford was bigger, stronger and, even without Chinn, he had more firepower per square millimeter than the *Panther* could combat. But with the *Panther* and Balac Strike together, his odds suddenly went from pretty good to only so-so. Maybe, if he got even closer to the *Panther*, the VTOL threat would be neutralized, its pilot stymied because his missiles would damage his own man. Besides, Crawford was hoping the missile blasts would distract the *Panther*’s pilot, and even though that ’Mech was lighter and faster, his enemy would expect him to be moving *away* now, not for him at breakneck speed.

If Crawford had another five seconds, he might have made it. But he didn’t have the time, and he saw disaster coming right before it arrived. The *Panther* whipped its right arm up so quickly it was almost a blur—or maybe it was a trick of the mind, Crawford’s perceptions dulled by fatigue and heat and the sudden grim realization of certain death, time dilating to showcase every moment. The *Panther*’s PPC crackled to life once more. Crawford felt a huge jolt that shuddered into the well of his seat, and his diagnostic interpretation computer flashed the information: a hit on Phantom’s left leg, just at the critical juncture between the upper and lower actuators.

“Chinn!” Crawford bawled as he canted right, taking weight off his ’Mech’s left leg and bringing his right medium laser to bear. But his adversary saw it coming, and Crawford’s shot went wide. “Dammit, Chinn, where are you? I need help here!”

Time spun out, the next instant seeming long as an age. The *Panther* ducked and weaved, loosing another PPC bolt that struck Crawford in the chest, right in Phantom’s heart and taking out the left torso

laser. The *Black Knight* rocked and swayed, and then Crawford felt another shudder rippling through myomer bundles and titanium bone, and he had a brief vision of the VTOL barreling down for a kill.

But it wasn't. Jackhammering into the hardpan, Chinn's *Thor* jumped in, landing to Crawford's left and snap-firing all its lasers at once. The *Panther* sprang away on a roar of jump jets and simultaneously loosed a spread of missiles: both racks, right down Crawford's throat.

As the missiles closed, Crawford had time for one thought: *Oh, crap* .

The missiles thudded against his ferroglass canopy, one right after the other, with a sound that reminded Crawford of when he was a kid and thought it was totally cool to drop water balloons from second-story windows. Bright flowers of yellow paint bloomed before his eyes, and his systems told him the rest.

A voice in his helmet, not Chinn: "And you're dead."

"Yeah, thanks for the information, Measho." Disgusted, Crawford flopped back in his command couch and felt the fatigue spread over him like a hot, wet blanket.

Chinn's voice came then. "I'm sorry, Andre." A pause. "It was my fault."

"Yes, actually, it was," said Crawford. He pivoted his *Black Knight* so he could see her around the yellow blotches slowly oozing over his canopy. "I told you not to go so wide."

"It was a mistake. And then I thought I had a lock, but I didn't. I overshot."

"And so I got splattered. Paint, dud weapons, or the real thing, the end result's the same, Chinn. I'm dead." He felt a bloom of fury bunch in his chest and radiate in hot fingers until his head felt so full he was certain he'd have a stroke, right then and there. "Chinn, you neverever leave such a large gap along your lancemate's flank; you know that. Otherwise, what will happen is precisely what did. Your performance rating is getting worse all the time. *Itsucks* , Chinn."

There was a moment's silence when Chinn didn't respond and neither of their Republic "enemies"—*Sho-sa* Wahab Fusilli, who'd brought his Balac Strike around and was now hovering above the salt pan stirring up clouds of white grit, and *Tai-i* Abeda Measho in Katana's "Kat"—said a word for or against. What *could* they say?

Finally, the silence was broken, but not by Chinn. "All right, stow it."

Still steaming, Crawford turned. The huge bulk of an olive green *BattleMaster* reared up from an arc of flat-cut boulders a half klick to the right. He waited until the 'Mech was nearly nose to nose before he said, "I'm sorry, *Tai-sho* . I lost my temper."

"Understandable when you've just been killed." Katana's voice was without irony or sarcasm. "But that's it, people. War's over. Now everyone go home and hit the showers. Cool off."

Sage advice. Crawford brought his 'Mech around and began picking his way back to base. *In more ways than one* .

Katana's Journal

14 January 3135

We met after breakfast—Crawford, Fusilli, and Measho, but not Toni because I wouldn't do that to her—and Andre let me have it. "*Tai-sho*, you must consider the possibility."

No one else said a word. Measho suddenly found something of intense interest in his lap. Fusilli, OSP to the core, took everything in, those baby blues of his not missing a trick and giving nothing away. And, as always, the Old Master stood sentry at the *shoji*. I said, "Do you see Chinn here? Isn't it obvious that I've already considered it?" Then I gave Andre one of my best hard stares. Most people flinch away.

Andre isn't most people. "Obviously," he said, scrubbing at his green eyes with the heels of both hands. He still looked limp as a wet noodle. Roasting in a Mech will do that to you. Crawford sighed and then, blinking, looked up. "But, *Tai-sho*, a lance must function as one heart, one mind. Chinn's heart and mind are divided. It's become more apparent as we've gone along and most especially when we tangle with Republic troops. She doesn't want to hurt them, plain and simple. If she can cut them a little slack so they withdraw from the field, that's fine with her. I won't argue the fact that it's humane. There's no honor in chasing down an enemy who cannot defend himself. But honor is one thing. Aiding the enemy is another. Whatever else she is, Chinn's a creature of The Republic, and she's blue all the way through."

Fusilli cut in then. "You have to admit Chinn *does* have an excellent record. Without her, we'd have lost against the Swordsworn six months ago. As I recall, she saved *your* butt, Crawford, when that *Sphinx* was doing its damndest to melt it off."

Crawford opened his mouth to reply, but then Measho broke in. "But we can't expect the past to simply disappear. The past exerts a strong influence on the present."

Crawford and Fusilli subsided, with good reason. Measho talks so rarely that anything he's got to say is usually novel—and good. He's my thinker, as fine a pilot and loyal as any man whose veins run with Combine blood. I gave him the nod.

Measho said, "I understand how the past taints someone; it's like going around with a brand on your forehead. But the worst thing you can do is not acknowledge that the past makes you who you are. You all know that my father worked with the *yakuza* on Buckminster. When that came out, he lost his money, prestige and, most importantly, his self-respect. It simply destroyed him. I nearly allowed it to destroy me, thinking that his shame became mine. Maybe I worked harder because of it, I don't know." His soft brown eyes locked first on Fusilli's and then Crawford's. "But not a day goes by that I don't think about it. And the only reason I'm here, instead of slinking around somewhere else, is because our *tai-sho* saw past that *Tai-sho* Tormark gave me a chance. So I'm sure she sees past Chinn's faults to her warrior's heart. We should trust her judgment."

The others were silent. Even I was a bit shocked. I was also embarrassed. Measho tends to idolize me, I think, because I loaned him our family's *Panther*. It's nice to hear when someone absolutely worships you, but you can't be a good commander if you thrive on worship. Eventually, your people will find another god. "Toni's a fine warrior. She wouldn't be in my lance otherwise. But Andre's right. If I didn't want to hear and weigh opinions, I wouldn't ask." I sighed, hating this part. "So, based on Andre's assessment, Toni's got work to do, and she can't do it on Proserpina. She has to want to excel again not *because* of but *in spite* of me. Better for her if we swap. Measho, you come back with me. Toni will stay with you, Andre."

Andre looked wary. I could understand; he didn't know if I was simply making my problems his. Everyone was . . . no, *is* aware of my relationship with Toni. I've had my share of lovers, male and female, but Toni touches my heart, and I know I can't be objective—and when you've lost that, you risk everyone else. Andre said, "If that's what you want, *Tai-sho*, of course. You know I'll work with her."

I gave a small inward sigh of relief. "Yes, I do, and I know you'll work her hard. That's what she needs. We can't afford a single weak link anywhere. We're hanging on by our toenails as it is."

A pause, then Fusilli said, "Then you intend to move forward." He didn't sound as if he was very happy about it.

I nodded. "That's always been my intention."

Fusilli's eyebrows crawled for his hairline. "No disrespect intended, but with what, exactly? We barely have enough people and materiel as it is."

"I'm aware of that. But stagnation simply buys more time for our enemies, and those who would take advantage of others' weakness."

Measho said, "Isn't that what we're doing to people already?"

He said it without sarcasm or reproof. "Yes," I said, without hesitation. Well, all right; *Idid* hesitate long enough to allow the Old Master to butt in, only he didn't. So I plowed on. "Except we're in the right. I'm not taking back anything that isn't rightfully the Combine's." A lawyer could probably poke a million holes in that, but Measho isn't a lawyer and neither am I.

I dismissed everyone a short time later, but Fusilli lingered. I saw those keen blue eyes of his snap toward the Old Master then back at me. "*Tai-sho*, you know I would never openly oppose you in front of the others. But you aren't serious, are you? This moving forward . . . intellectually, I understand. But face reality. We'd be seriously compromised if anyone decided to attack on multiple fronts."

Well, first off, he was lying. Fusilli's opposed me a lot in front of other people. Some commanders wouldn't tolerate that. I do because he's a damned good intelligence officer. But I don't trust him the way I trust Andre. (Although, how much do *Ireally* trust Andre? *This* much: Crawford doesn't know a thing about McCain and Drexel's mission to Junction. Come to think of it, neither does Toni. I don't completely trust anyone but the Old Master. Probably why I sleep with a pistol under my pillow, and my katana unsheathed in its stand.)

"We'll take all comers. Are you having second thoughts, *Sho-sa* Fusilli?"

The tips of his ears flamed. "You know that's not the issue."

"No? Then why bring it up? *Is* there someone out there, mobilizing to strike us? Or are you in the dark again?"

He blinked, and I knew I'd struck a nerve. I'd meant to. Lately, O5P hasn't exactly been a font of information. Crawford's too busy with his command duties, so I let him off the hook. Fusilli doesn't have an excuse, and sometimes I have the feeling that he knows way more than he lets on.

He said, "With all due respect, the best agents have their limitations. Without ready access to JumpShips

and with no communications, my net can only be so wide.”

“So you’re saying nothing’s happening in the Combine.”

“I didn’t say that. The information I have so far isn’t that interesting, that’s all.”

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that?”

“Of course.” Fusilli ticked items off on his fingers. “One: Theodore Kurita’s left his post on New Samarkand. No one knows where or why. On the other hand, no one really cares. Theodore’s as much a null as his father. Two: The coordinator doesn’t seem to care about us one way or the other. Three: Only *Tai-shu* Sakamoto openly disagrees with the coordinator, and his fighters have stepped up their forays into Prefecture I.”

I was intrigued. Sakamoto’s a hothead; always has been, always will be. I’ve never met the man, but I know him by reputation. He’s samurai all right, but the kind that gives samurai a bad name: brutal, narcissistic, relentless; *theronin* kind who used to walk around old Terra hacking up peasants and raping their wives. Sure, they ruled, but with an iron fist, not honor. “What about the coordinator? Does he sanction the raids?”

Fusilli shrugged. “He’s silent. Nothing new. So either he doesn’t care . . .”

“Or he’s giving Sakamoto tacit assent.” Well, now, *that* was interesting. Certainly, I’ve done a tad more than initiate petty skirmishes. Maybe the coordinator’s silence was a nod to keep going?

The next moment, I was cursing myself. Looking to the coordinator solved nothing, like waiting for your father to pat you on the head. “Do you think Sakamoto’s planning a raid—for Vega, maybe?”

Fusilli thought, then shook his head. “I haven’t a clue. The problem is, I’m way out here and he’s way over there. It’s this damn outage. I might as well be blind and deaf. But if I could get closer to the action, I might be able to give you something.”

He had a point, and maybe I felt bad—poking him in the eye with that snipe about his lack of information. Whatever doubts I have about Fusilli, and I’ve got plenty *justbecause*, they’re probably no more or less than Andre has about Toni. Maybe I need to cut Fusilli some slack, give him the tools he says he needs for his job.

So I gave him a mission: find out Sakamoto’s intentions. The only drawback is that, without communications and considering how tight our funding is, he’ll only report back when there’s something really big. I’ll just have to trust that he knows what that something is. But before he left, he did a very curious thing. He’d already bowed and turned on his heel, then looked back. “*Tai-sho*, Prefecture I’s hell and gone. It’ll take forever to get word back and forth. So if I see an opportunity to act on my own, perhaps plant a few seeds of disinformation, may I . . . ?”

Now *that* was new. I shook my head. “Fusilli, I appreciate your good intentions, I do. But anything done *to* Sakamoto comes *from* me? Understood?”

From the way those baby blues shuttered? He understood. He just didn’t like it. I can appreciate that. But I’ve kept O5P in the dark about some things. Fusilli has no idea what Andre’s orders are, and vice versa. A necessary evil. It only pays to let the left hand know what the right is doing some of the time because given half a chance, people will always disappoint and surprise the hell out of you.

That's something I understand pretty damn well. Way back when, Otome-*sant* told me a lot about my father—stuff I didn't know. Like, and this floored me, Akira Tormark was an O5P spy who'd married twice, divorced once and had *other* kids. Sons? Daughters? Otome-*sant* didn't know. And then my father was just . . . *gone* . But to where? Who the hell knows?

Thinking about that brings back that horrible night: my father holding Kan Otome's blood-smeared katana, Uncle Kan's sightless eyes starting from their sockets. And then that strange young man by my father's side, and not only *what* he said but *how* he said it: "*Is that her?*" As if he knew, or had known *of*, me but never *seen* me and . . . as if I should know *him*.

Ugh. Just felt as if someone walked over my grave. Anyway, can't think about that now. Got to look ahead and pray that the coordinator wakes up and realizes that he, too, stands to lose a great deal. His empire. His identity. And all of us, his children.

I wonder if Toni will understand. I wonder how much she'll hate me.

When I was leaving the Old Master finally stirred. "A bitter lesson, *Musume* : A leader tends to the needs of the whole, not the benefit of the one."

As if he'd read my mind.

13

Imperial City, Luthien

Late evening, 20 January 3135

An hour trying to meditate and her thoughts still jumped like a hummingbird zipping from one blossom to the next; her feet ached from kneeling, and her toes had cramped. But she couldn't free her mind of what her father had said: *A crown is only as valuable as its jewels, new and old* . And that reference to black pearls . . . What could it mean?

Sighing, Emi opened her eyes. Her room was very dim, lit only by two fat candles set upon her private *kamidana* . She used a standard arrangement: two evergreens *asaki* branches in vases; the *jinja* , an ark containing sacred *ofuda* , front and center; two miniature jars filled with sake and a tiny water jug at center, flanked on either side by two shallow ceramic vessels: salt on the right, rice on the left. There was one difference between her *kamidana* and everyone else's: an elaborate, ivory-carved Kurita dragon centered on the sake jug, and it was this upon which her eyes lingered. The Combine was the Dragon, and the coordinator the Combine, a sort of holy trinity upon which her universe hinged.

Exasperated, Emi pushed up from her knees, bowed, clapped her hands twice, and then bowed more deeply before backing three steps until she felt hardwood floor beneath her stocking feet. The floor had cooled as the evening progressed, and her feet whispered over the burnished wood as she paced.

It behooves us to care for such a daughter. Obviously, that was Katana Tormark. But did her father *truly* mean for her to act? Despite his assurances, perhaps he was just as worried as she was that House Kurita would crumble. *If the other, silent corruption of our blood doesn't destroy us first.* . . . Emi slammed down on that particular line of thought. There was nothing she could do about *that*

anyway—not unless she was willing to throw honor to the wind. Besides, she had caught the cunning looks Bhatia sometimes threw her father's way. *I know your thoughts, Director, and they are deep, but I see your ambition; a tidal wave that would sweep my father from power, and my brother, too . . .*

Her thoughts were interrupted by a series of knocks upon *ashoji*, then, no more than taps: a code. "Come," she said. The translucent rice paper screen slid to one side, and Joji Ashida, her personal bodyguard and one of her most trusted OSP agents, entered. Ashida was thirty-five, a year older than Emi, but he carried himself with the bearing of a much older, more experienced man. His black eyes glittered with a keen intelligence, and a shoulder-length fall of hair, a shade of black like the raven's wing, was bound to his head in a traditional topknot.

Ashida bowed. "*Jokan*, I have news."

"Speak."

"*Tai-shu* Sakamoto has called a meeting of *ofoyabuns*: Atsutane Kobayashi from Kitalpha, Jazeburo Enda from Shibuka, and Minukachi's Hideki Ame."

A prick of alarm stabbed her chest. "Why would Sakamoto . . . what could *yakuza* . . . ?" Then Emi gasped. "Sakamoto wants *war*."

"But a general needs armies, and the armies need supplies. So he turns to the *oyabuns*. They're rich because Sakamoto suffers them in exchange for three itches that require periodic scratching"—Ashida sniffed—"sweets, women and wine."

"You forgot power," Emi murmured, but her mind was already jumping ahead. How could she use this information to her father's—and the Combine's—advantage? "What about Bhatia?"

"Anyone's guess. Either he's turning a blind eye to treason, or he doesn't know."

"What would he gain if he *does* know?"

"It depends on his timing. He may wait until Sakamoto falters, or he might let the chips fall where they may, even if House Kurita collapses, hoping that he'll gain Sakamoto's favor."

Emi came to a decision. She crossed to her writing table and pulled out a drawer, from which she extracted a holo-vid disk. At the touch of a button, a scroll of wood retracted; a flat screen unfolded and locked into position, and a wash of blue light indicated that the system's holo-projector was ready to record. "We aren't going to wait around for either alternative. Go, bring Miko. I have an errand for her."

She was done by the time Ashida returned a few moments later, a young *jukurensha* in tow. The girl's eyes were heavy with sleep, her hair mussed and her simple gray kimono improperly knotted and slightly askew, the fabric falling away and revealing a tantalizing swell of breast. She bowed. "You summoned me, *Jokan*."

"Yes," said Emi, ejected the disk from her computer and standing. She hated giving the duty to a novice, but Miko Tanaka was one of her most advanced and learned girls, bright and quick. Neither Emi nor Ashida could be linked to the message in any way. Emi handed Miko the disk. "I want you to send this as a priority communiqué," and she gave the girl the link number and destination.

The shadow of a frown marred Miko's smooth forehead. "A priority message, *Jokan*?" Miko's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. "To *afabrics* merchant?"

Emi saw that the girl was thoroughly awake now. She managed a small chuckle that she hoped telegraphed embarrassment. "Your Keeper's been remiss. There's a state banquet in two months, and I must have a new kimono."

A lie. Emi watched as the girl tucked the disk into her sleeve, bowed and hurried out. Keepers weren't supposed to lie. But needs must that she lie, and so she did. Yet Emi wondered how many more rules she would bend. Or break.

Ramadeep Bhatia's Mansion

Midnight, 21 January 3135

Bhatia couldn't sleep. He'd ordered the easternmost *shoji* opened and stood there now. A breeze skimmed Lake Tonada, and brought the scent of water and jasmine. He wore a plain, black dressing gown, liking the feel of silk and air whispering over his skin. Perhaps a woman's fingers or the fan of her hair would've been better. Maybe when he'd calmed down . . . but not right now.

Weeks gone and Mori still silent. Bhatia gnawed the inside of his lower lip. The agent's last contact was six weeks ago, and Bhatia's instructions then had been specific. Push Sakamoto into action by whatever means necessary. But Mori had gone silent; a necessary evil of intelligence work but for *solong* . . .

If he's dead, I'm in the dark. A finger of wind raised the gooseflesh on Bhatia's arms, and he shivered. If Mori was dead, then it might've been an accident—Sakamoto in one of his famously ill humors, perhaps—or Mori had been discovered, then executed. That Sakamoto *hadn't* informed Kurita might mean that the warlord was waiting until the time was right—say, if things went badly during his little campaign. Then Sakamoto could accuse Bhatia of treason; lay it out for the Peacock that, here, one of Bhatia's men had *goaded* him to war and poor Sakamoto, what was he to do? Bhatia could practically hear Sakamoto now: *Tono, I could only assume that Bhatia acted with your approval* . . .

Would nothing go well? Damn this outage anyway! Bhatia's fists balled and his fingers itched with the urge to break something.

I've only got one other option. Two, actually: one in Katana's camp, and the other close by, but if either ploy fails or, worse yet, I'm discovered . . .

He was so preoccupied he didn't hear the person behind him until much too late. Suddenly his unconscious mind spiked an alarm, and he half turned, but an arm locked around his neck; there was a cruel pressure on his throat. Choking, Bhatia tried reaching behind to gouge out his assailant's eyes, but his hands met empty air. It was only then that he realized—his assailant was small, light. *A woman* . . .

Against all instinct, Bhatia let his body sag, and when he heard his assailant grunt under the sudden dead weight, Bhatia reared, then rolled right. His assailant gave a muffled cry as they tumbled to the floor, and Bhatia thought he had her for a moment, but then somehow she managed to wriggle free, roll onto her back; he felt her grab his left arm at the elbow and his kimono with her right. His kimono fell open, and she pulled, planting her left foot against his right hip. A tug, and then he was sailing, flipping over her head. The floor rushed at his face; he managed a tuck and roll, but then she was on him again in a flash. In another second, or maybe two, his shoulders were tacked to the floor by her knees, her weight on his bare chest. Then she laughed, a deep, husky sound. And then she did something more remarkable:

kissed him so thoroughly his mind reeled.

“Miss me?” Miko Tanaka said. Her hair flowed in loose black rivers and he shivered, this time with lust, as her hair skimmed along his skin.

“God, yes.” Bhatia slid a hand beneath a fold of Miko’s kimono. She was naked and his fingers traced the smooth curve of her left breast. Impatient now, Bhatia tugged the kimono apart, and as the fabric puddled around her waist, he caught the scent of lemon and couldn’t wait any longer. Pulling her down, he moaned with pleasure as their skin met. “You don’t know how much.”

Bhatia’s Mansion

Noon, 21 January 3135

Bhatia hummed as he toweled off from his bath. What a minx: a woman who knew enough to slip away so there would be no awkward questions come morning. A terrific piece of luck, too—that night one of his informants reported that Emi’s little *jukurensa* had been *avery* naughty girl with one of the Peacock’s palace guards. The hapless guard was moldering at the bottom of a very long, very abandoned mining shaft. And Miko had ended up in his bed.

And poor deluded Emi Kurita, thinking she can play at a game in which she’s an amateur . . . Emi’s plan was laughable. What, marshal sleeper agents, the *descendents* of the original O5P cell that defected with Akira Tormark, eh? To her credit, she’d narrowed it down to a particular agent, but what made her think *he’d* answer her call? He wouldn’t, for a very simple reason: *Because little Emi doesn’t realize that I had him first.* Bhatia’s grin widened to reveal his very white, very perfect teeth. *A double agent, yes, but the beauty of it . . . he’s really still mine.*

Then he thought about the other, more cryptic message on Emi’s data disk. Junction? A fabrics merchant? Why? Naked, Bhatia padded to his bedroom. He saw that his lunch had been delivered while he bathed, and his appetite, roused from the exertions of the night before, roared to life, and he did nothing more for a few minutes than drink his soup and dip up rice balls and sweet rectangles of tamago.

When he was sated, he settled in for a good think. The message was addressed to a merchant, an importer-exporter of exotic fabrics. Nothing unusual about that, but the message was clear, brief and utterly indecipherable: *Black goes well with a little red .*

Black? Bhatia inhaled a mouthful of green tea and rolled it on his tongue before swallowing. As in a fabric? But black was the color of night and evil. And red was a bad omen; the color of blood and fire, of passion. Not colors a Keeper would choose.

There was a rap at his *shoji* , and an ISF agent—Bhatia couldn’t remember all their names; who could keep track?—entered. He cradled a bulky package in his arms. Bowing, the agent averted his eyes from Bhatia’s nakedness and said, “A package marked for your eyes only, *Tono* . There is also a data crystal.”

Bhatia frowned. “The origination point?”

The agent looked over Bhatia’s head. “Unknown, *Tono* . But the package and crystal have been scanned, and are free of explosives or listening devices.”

Dismissing the agent, Bhatia studied the package. Perfectly square, plain black plasticene exterior, with a combination catch centered on one of the faces. But to obtain the combination, he’d have to listen to the

message. He studied the crystal for a long minute, then slid it into his player. The player clicked and then a voice seeped from his holovid's speakers. The voice had been electronically distorted, but Bhatia felt his stomach bottom out.

"Good day, Director. I hope this finds you well. I, on the other hand, am more than a little peeved. Haven't you learned yet? The only reason I let the last pup get so close was because, well, he seemed so eager. But then we had a meeting of the minds, and I told him listen, you've got to relax and not let the job go to your head.

"But, no hard feelings, and to show I'm sincere I've sent this small token of my esteem. Sorry, I know it'll have taken a dog's age to get to you, things being what they are. Honestly, you can't get a good postman for love or money. The combination is . . . oh, do get a pen, Director, I'll wait." Bhatia jerked out of his shock, scabbled for a pen. The voice reeled off a series of numbers while Bhatia scribbled.

"Oh, one last little bit of advice, Director," said the voice. "Watch your back. You can be sure I will." The recording clicked off.

No mistaking the malevolence in that voice. And that last bit about watching his back . . . There must be a clue in the package. Sweat dewed Bhatia's upper lip, and his heart stuttered. But, in the next moment, Bhatia was cursing himself as a fool. Idiot, this was what that *monster* wanted! Bhatia snatched up the paper and punched in the combination code. Well, he'd see about *that* .

There was a tiny, metallic *nick* . The outer shell cracked, revealing an oval, gunmetal gray, plexipolymer shell. Another mechanical hum, and then the gray egg split in two with a long sigh as if it'd held its breath. Rearing back, Bhatia let out an inarticulate cry, something between a moan and a scream, as a noxious, foul miasma of decay slammed against his face. Bhatia wanted to look away but couldn't, and the sight seared his eyes and skewered his brain like a red-hot spike.

The first wave of blowflies had gone on with their business of feasting upon the fleshy remains. But they had died, and the maggots hatched from the millions of eggs deposited on C's eyes and in his gaping mouth and nose and ears and the mangled stump of his neck had liquefied to gray-green, gelatinous ooze. The agent's hair had sloughed off in a black, matted mass and puddled along what was left of C's left ear.

Gagging, Bhatia flinched away; the table jittered. C's head lolled, with a squelching, sucking sound. The eyes were gone; the carrion eaters had nibbled away his lips, and in that ghastly rictus grin, C revealed another failing (beyond the obvious that he was rather bad at surveillance). He hadn't taken very good care of his teeth, either.

A ball of sour, hot gorge rocketed up Bhatia's throat and, stumbling back, Ramadeep Bhatia turned aside and lost his lunch.

Katana popped awake, then frowned into the grainy darkness of her bedroom. Something was wrong, enough to drag her from sleep. The east-facing *shoji* was softly lit, translucent, the wooden lattice visible as a grid of neat squares and rectangles. An hour or so before dawn, she imagined. Then she heard what had seeped into her mind as she slept; a tiny, barely audible *screeee*, like the sound a hinge made when it needed oil.

She was instantly on the alert. Her swords were cradled on their stand across the room. Too far away. Still, she had her pistol. She rolled onto her left side, careful not to rustle the bedclothes. With what seemed like agonizing slowness, she slid her right hand under her pillow where she kept her pistol. In the next instant, her breath caught in a stifled gasp—because the pistol was *gone*.

Movement now, and she started to roll but wasn't fast enough. Hands—*no, metal*—sliding off her bare back, snagging her left arm, and then she was being crushed into the soft mattress as someone straddled her back, forcing her face into her pillow. She struggled for air, tried twisting her face to the side, but whoever was there was very strong and she couldn't breathe. Her hands were free, though, and her fingers slid across metal before she managed to get a handhold. But then her assailant shifted slightly, pried her hands free and used his knees to pin her shoulders to the bed. Her hands fluttered uselessly against the bed. Her lungs screamed for air; her chest burned; the blackness before her eyes swam . . .

At what must have been the last possible second, she was dimly aware that the weight on her back was gone. Someone flipped her onto her back and again pinned her to the bed by her shoulders, but that didn't matter because there was air. She couldn't think of anything else for several seconds as her tortured lungs reeled in a breath, then another. "Wh . . . what?"

The Bounty Hunter boomed a huge laugh, the speakers in his helmet distorting the sound so his voice came out hollow but with an undercurrent of electronic hum, like an echo transmitted through a cable down a deep shaft. "That'll teach you. Next time, it might be someone who doesn't like you as much as I do."

Fury replaced panic. "Wha . . . what," she began then was seized by a fit of coughing. "What are you doing?" she said, finally, in a strangled wheeze. "How . . . how did you get . . . get . . . why . . ." She broke off as another fit of coughing racked her body. "Where's the . . . the Old . . . ?"

"The old man? He's fine. A bit dozy, like your guards. The amnesic gas will wear off in a half hour or so."

"If . . . if you've hurt him, any of them, I'll . . . I'll kill you."

She couldn't see his face, but she heard the smile. "Careful, Katana. I just might take you up on that someday. I venture to say that our struggle might prove very interesting, certainly for me. And is this gratitude? Here I go to all this trouble, expose a critical lapse in your security and you're so peevish." He paused then, staring down at her and, even though the light was still very dim, Katana was aware of his attentiveness, those keen eyes behind that visor, roving over the contours of her body. She sensed a subtle change, a sort of expectancy, as if he had just realized something previously hidden away in his mind.

Katana glared. "Well, either rape me, or talk. But make the right choice. Otherwise, the consequences will be quite unpleasant."

Again, that bizarre hesitation . . . and then he gave a short bark, a laugh that was somehow forced, and

the weight on her shoulders was gone as he rolled from her body, the movement accompanied by tiny metallic squeaks. “Go on,” said the Bounty Hunter. “But put some clothes on. The view’s too distracting.”

“That’s your problem. You barge into my room in the middle of the night, you live with it.” Calling for lights, Katana pushed to her feet and stood, a fist planted into each hip. Arms akimbo, the Bounty Hunter stood at the foot of her bed, his bright green armor twinkling in the yellow-white fluorescents. Katana spied a pistol snuggled in a holster at his right hip. “What do you want?”

“I came to warn you.” His tone was all brisk business now. “*Tai-shu* Sakamoto’s going to mount an offensive.”

“What? *Warn* me? Has Fu . . . ?” She broke off. Not only couldn’t Fusilli have gathered the information that quickly, he’d never trust the Bounty Hunter. “How did you get your information?”

“Now, Katana, I can’t reveal *all* my sources. I’m your mystery man, remember?”

“Fine. Play it that way, and I’ll just say thanks and we go our separate ways. But you want in? Then *I* give the orders, and *you* take them. Otherwise, get the hell out of my bedroom.”

The Bounty Hunter tut-tutted. “Temper. You’re hardly in a position to play high and mighty. If Sakamoto moves against you, the Fury will be squashed like a bug. I have no objection to parting with news, but you need to ask nicely. You may not trust me, Katana, but you can’t dismiss me either.”

It was on the tip of Katana’s tongue to tell him just exactly where he could go and what he could do when he got there, but she bit the impulse back. “Please,” she said, and managed not to growl.

“Now, see? That wasn’t so hard,” he said. Then, seriously, “Sakamoto’s quietly moving units to Homam and Matar—and closer to you.”

That got her attention. “Does he want to join forces, or get rid of me?”

“The latter. Sakamoto has no love for the Tormarks, as I think you’re aware. Didn’t his great-great-great-grandfather once swear vengeance on your family? Or something like that. Honestly, it’s so hard keeping track of the feuds you nobles wage.”

Another jab, but Katana wasn’t listening. If Sakamoto arrayed his might against her Fury, she’d lose. Worse, her people would die—fighting, to be sure, but die nonetheless, and for very little. Surrender was unthinkable, of course, but she might be able to buy some time and send her people out of harm’s way. After all, Sakamoto wanted *her*. “When will he strike?”

“Can’t say.” The Bounty Hunter shrugged; his armor squeaked. “There’s word his troops are fed up, though. You know what a pompous ass he can be.”

“That’s not news.”

“Yes, *but* . . . word is that his troops wouldn’t weep at his departure.”

Katana arched one eyebrow. “Now, how can you know that?”

“I have a source in Sakamoto’s camp.”

Katana knew she'd never pry out whom, so she switched gears. "Speaking of camps, what are you doing *here*? You're *supposed* to be on Irian." Privately, she thought this particular incarnation of the Bounty Hunter to be much better off than his predecessors. *Must have an entire fleet of JumpShips at his disposal, the way he keeps turning up out of nowhere . . .*

"I wasn't aware I required a hall pass to go to the lavatory."

She breezed past the sarcasm. "What you need is to be more compliant. My people are antsy enough about you as it is, and you popping in and out whenever you please; they don't like it. Why not stay awhile? My field commanders should arrive within the next month. Then you can tell them what you've told me, and we can reassess, figure out our next move."

"Oh, happy day," said the Bounty Hunter dryly. "I'm all a-tingle with anticipation. You and I both know your field commanders have about as much faith in me as they do in the second coming of Devlin Stone."

"They might have fewer doubts if you weren't so damned evasive. Let us double-check your information. What's the harm? If it's valid, then they'll trust you more."

"What I live for: to climb the ladder of *Chu-sa* Crawford's good opinion. You know the man acts as if I have something to hide."

"Gee, you wear a mask; I wonder why?" Despite her irritation, Katana had to work not to smile. One thing about the Bounty Hunter: he was never boring. And she actually liked him, found it very easy to slip into repartee, as if they'd known one another for a very long time. She changed the subject. "Where are you off to next?"

"For me to know and you to discover. But feel free to send word through my secure ComStar account, and I'll deliver whatever you require, or be in my *Marauder* in a New Avalon minute."

And how does he afford a secure ComStar account? Acts like he's got his own HPG stashed away somewhere. "At least stay for a meal. Have breakfast with me, and we can talk."

There it was again, that little hesitation, something that was almost . . . Katana's eyes narrowed. Not something she *saw* so much as *sensed*. *As if he's attracted to me somehow, but more than physically . . .*

"Thanks, but no," said the Bounty Hunter, and Katana knew that the moment, whatever it had been, had passed. Her eyes tracked him as he moved to the *shoji* closing off her balcony. The paper was suffused with a golden glow, and the Bounty Hunter paused there, silhouetted against the amber hues of first dawn. "I'm afraid I got into a batch of bad eggs a few weeks ago and, well . . ." The wood frame let out a muted squall as he slid it to one side. "Let's just say, it's put me off my food."

And before Katana could say anything more, he'd vaulted over the balcony railing and was gone.

DropShipDelta, in lunar stationary orbit

Ship's night, 29 January 3135

"You did *what*?"

A faint sizzle, like grease on a hot griddle, and Marcus waited, lips compressed and eyes narrowed to slits. Damn the time lag in transmissions to and from the surface, anyway! A waste of valuable time . . . As he counted off the seconds, Marcus thought that, yes, things were slipping away from him now. Things were getting out of control.

He didn't kill her. He had the opportunity and the means and still . . .

Finally, there was a tiny pop and crackle, and then Marcus' face burned as he heard Jonathan's laughter. Even distorted because of distance and interference, Marcus knew at once that the laughter had no humor, nor was it simply indulgent. No, Jonathan's laugh was . . . malevolent. "I let her live," Jonathan said.

"I understand *that* . What I don't understand is *why*?" More waiting again as the message traveled to Proserpina. Something odd about Jonathan: he was beginning to act as if . . . Marcus struggled to pin his feelings down. *As if I'm a bother he tolerates* .

"Because it's so much more entertaining this way," said Jonathan. "Where's the fun in just killing her?"

"*Damn* fun." Marcus gripped the edges of his communications console with both hands. Metal bit into his palms. "That's *not* how we planned it."

Things weren't going well; no, they were not going according to plan. What was wrong with Jonathan? They were supposed to be a team, the way they'd been when they were younger.

Yes, a team, but Father always favored Jonathan. What, did Father think I was blind, that I wouldn't notice? I noticed all right. I wasn't born yesterday, just first. Well, I've done my sharing of killing. Through various channels, Marcus had managed to recapture some of their family's lost wealth. Without *him* , they'd never have come this far.

"You've had a lot of chances to get rid of Katana," he said now. "Get it over with so we can move on. There's more to life than chasing after Katana Tormark."

After a lag: "I'm not disagreeing," said Jonathan. "But part of the project has been to make her suffer. Well, we know that there are many ways to suffer, don't we, Brother? There's the physical, of course, but there's also confusion, misdirection, loss, shame . . . so many different and interesting ways to suffer."

"Don't talk *to me* about suffering," said Marcus. "Our mother suffered for years after Father turned his back on us. And then there was the accident . . . me . . . Why should Katana's life be any better?"

The time delay was only ten seconds but felt like ten centuries. Then there was a click, a hiss and finally, Jonathan: "Don't worry, Marcus. It won't be."

Conqueror's Pride, Proserpina

Night, 29 January 3135

Drip . . . drip . . . drip . . .

Something was wrong. Jonathan slouched over the kitchen table, listening to the slow *drip-drip-drip* . Like a leaky faucet. And a fly must have piggybacked in because he saw it: fat, black, doing loop-de-loops over a bowl of gray, greasy soba.

Jonathan threw his head back and sucked down another mouthful of bourbon, grimaced at the burn. His head felt hollow. He knew when things started going wrong. "In Katana's bedroom," he said out loud. "When I had her, when she . . ." He broke off, not wanting to say it because then it would be real. But he remembered; the dark gloss of her skin, her long legs . . .

He drank again, the glass clicking against his teeth. After talking to Marcus, he'd been restless. Ready to prowl. Finding a woman had been easy. Leaning against bricks at the mouth of a dark, moldy-smelling alley, he'd watched the parade: leggy women with high breasts; bored women with breasts that sagged like deflated balloons; scrawny ones so sick from drugs or drink they were walking skeletons. There were men, too, advertising in black leather cups, thigh-high boots and a smile.

He found the one he wanted. Not young; around thirty. Tawny, chocolate-colored skin and long, muscled legs. Not as tall as Katana, but her face was unblemished, her teeth very white, and when he went up to her, he caught a scent of cinnamon and vanilla. She brought him to her apartment, and then things had started. Things had happened. Things had gone wrong.

"I mean, there's no other way to put it," he said, swinging his head left. "Wouldn't you agree?"

The woman didn't answer. Her head was thrown back; her glassy eyes bulged; the red-black crater that had been her throat oozed blood that *drip-drip-dripped*, but more slowly now because she'd been dead awhile and the blood was starting to coagulate. But his voice'd startled the fly. It abandoned the soup, landed on the woman's glazed right eye. Didn't like that much and flitted to the left and then darted into the cave of her gaping mouth, open in a silent scream.

And things had gone so well in the beginning. He'd felt the *click*. Things were under his control. But then things went out of control and when it was done, when the woman was finally dead, it still wasn't enough. It was like someone had pulled out his guts, reeled out loops of pink intestine and yellow fat. Because he was still hungry, still crazy-nuts for more, and he knew why.

For him, only Katana would be good enough.

Deber City, Benjamin

Benjamin Military District, Draconis Combine

2 February 3135

I want, I want, I want. Stone-faced, Atsutane Kobayashi waited while Sakamoto rambled on. They'd arrived on Benjamin two days ago: Kobayashi and his *Saki-mono* from Kitalpha, Hideki Ame's party from Minukachi, and last but certainly not least, no, never least, Jazeburo Enda from Shibuka, a retinue of pretty geishas and sweet plum wine in tow.

Sakamoto, the great warlord, with his *I wants*: the man could bleat like a goat. *I want this, and I want that, and I want the other*. It would never occur to Sakamoto to *ask* politely. A lowly *oyabun* would, of course, not worry about honor. Of course Kobayashi had known that, eventually, something like this would come; if not during Sakamoto's time then from the next warlord craving more power and higher

glory.

Yes, but there is a way to ask, and a way to demand. He lets us know that we yakuza operate at his pleasure, under his protection. So, he will have what he wants, and he will have it when he wants—as if he's never profited from our ventures.

He felt heat crawl up his neck. No, that would never do. Kobayashi took refuge in *zanshin*, watchful alertness. An ancient skill practiced by samurai and it served Kobayashi now, calming his heart and cooling his skin, and just in the nick of time because Sakamoto swung his bull's head and regarded him with suspicion.

“You're a close one, Kobayashi,” said Sakamoto, not bothering with an honorific.

Another opportunity to rub my nose in it. Kobayashi kept his face still, though his blood boiled. Who was Sakamoto anyway; who was he to order Kobayashi to do this or that? He knew the answer, of course: *the man who suffers my Wakashuto continue in their activities unmolested.* Kobayashi watched as if from a great distance: saw Sakamoto come round in a swirl of red-and-black-and-gold brocade kimono, belted with a stiff *kaku* obi that echoed the coil of dragons spilling over the kimono; felt Sakamoto's breath in his face, and noted, with an almost wry detachment, that Sakamoto might not smell like plum wine but the liquor had left its imprint in a clot of burst capillaries threading through Sakamoto's nose.

Sakamoto leaned close enough that his spittle wet Kobayashi's cheek with a fine spray. “What say you, eh?”

Kobayashi inclined his head—just enough to show respect yet not enough to injure his own honor. “I say nothing, Sakamoto-*san*. I have nothing to offer, save to observe that the Ghost Regiments were disbanded decades ago, their men and women scattered as surely as a strong wind carries away the individual petals of the most perfect cherry blossom. For an operation of the magnitude you propose, however, we will have to call upon people who have never fought a battle, have barely mastered the skills necessary to survive a simulation.”

“Bah!” Sakamoto waved Kobayashi's words away. He turned his back on Kobayashi—another insult—and faced the other *oyabuns*. “You *yakuza* have operated with impunity for years. I've not lifted a finger to stop you, never asked for your services.”

Untrue, Kobayashi knew. Sakamoto took his pick of the finest they each had to offer, and it was not for the first time that he was thankful for the fact that Sakamoto disliked pachinko and baccarat, his clan's particular stock-in-trade.

“Well, now it's time for a little payback,” bawled Sakamoto. He pinned Ame with a sharp look. Ame, a corpulent little man with gold rings squeezed onto pinkies that looked more like sausages, visibly quailed.

“And there's no use your pleading that you can't get the men or materiel either,” said Sakamoto, drilling Enda with the same glare. But Enda merely blinked. He was as thin as Ame was corpulent—a man with a lean, perpetually hungry expression capped with hair as black and oily as sealskin. “I know you've got them. If you don't deliver, I'll shut you all down, kick the lot of you down the street, and promote the hungriest pup in line to your post.”

“Sakamoto-*san*,” said Enda, bowing that sleek head of his. When he spoke, his tone was so honeyed and unctuous that Kobayashi was amazed the man could talk through all that sweet goo. “You have been

magnanimous in overlooking our . . . activities. Simply tell us what you require, and we shall deliver.”

Speak for yourself. Kobayashi listened with growing dismay as Sakamoto rattled off troop complements and weapons needs. An operation of this magnitude would gut Kobayashi’s effective workforce by two-thirds.

“And BattleMechs, I want them primed, their pilots ready for action. And no use pretending you don’t have them; I know you do. *Youyakuza* never throw anything out. You’re like pack rats. And I want them all,” said Sakamoto, planting his fists on his hips, “in four months’ time.”

Ame’s gasp was audible, and Enda’s jaw went slack. Kobayashi was stunned. Four months? To marshal all those men and materiel? Kobayashi almost shook his head but checked himself before he made what would be a supreme error. Sakamoto had had men’s heads for less, and Kobayashi was very attached to his, thank you.

Yet if this is what the coordinator wishes . . . Kobayashi bowed his head *inrei* as far as he was able with the accursed table in the way. (Insult to injury, not seating them on tatami but *chairs* . Maddening.) “Of course, we serve the coordinator at his pleasure as we have always done.”

He would have said more but Sakamoto cut him off. “No,” he said, his tone sharp as the snap of a whip. “This time, Kobayashi, you serve *atmine* .”

The pronouncement was so stunning that Kobayashi simply gawked. There was a slight scuffle behind them as each *yabun*’s *Saki-mono* , stationed along the wall, reacted in kind. Evidently Sakamoto read their expressions because when he continued, his tone was more conciliatory. “The coordinator suggested that no one act until the time was right. We met with him, the other warlords and me, and that’s what he said. Well, *now* is precisely the right time.”

When he didn’t elaborate, the *yabuns* exchanged looks with one another in a pantomime of surprise, as if to ask *All right, who wants to go first?* Finally, it was Kobayashi who cleared his throat. “Of course, Sakamoto-*san*, it will be as you wish. And you may rest assured that we shall be discreet.”

But Sakamoto had one more surprise in store. “On the contrary: I want *somenoise*, and I will tell you *precisely* when the time is right.”

When the time is right, eh? Sakamoto’s words niggled at the back of Kobayashi’s brain like a cloud of gnats. He stood behind his DropShip pilot and watched the viewscreen as they broke orbit. Benjamin fell away, a brown ball of a world with its twenty semi-suns strung around in orbit like gaudy beads. And good-bye, Sakamoto. Not good riddance: whatever else Sakamoto was, he was still *tai-shu* . But the way he’d reacted at mention of the coordinator . . .

Kobayashi replayed the rest in his head: how they’d been dismissed—summarily, it seemed to Kobayashi, as if Sakamoto worried he might let something else slip; and how Enda had hung back, of course. Kobayashi’s lip curled in distaste. The oily young *yabun* had practically purred, assuring Sakamoto that, of course, the Cholobara wine was wonderfully full of body, and his crop of lovely young geishas were a vintage lot. Sakamoto had practically drooled. Cholobara was prohibitively expensive, spoiled quickly and had to be drunk within a month’s time. (And how would Enda fare if he turned over as many of his freighters as he’d promised?) The wine was a potent aphrodisiac besides. Yes, Sakamoto had sampled both wine *and* women.

But *whattime*? And by whose right? Kobayashi would have to be as foolish as Ame—who wasn't a fool, really, just fat—to believe that Sakamoto hadn't twisted the coordinator's words to suit his purpose. Which brought up a very interesting question: How much had Sakamoto lied? Not that deception bothered Kobayashi on principle; every businessman mastered the finer points of deception. Kobayashi was nothing if not astute and a practitioner of the art.

But business is business, and war is about honor. Kobayashi would have to be deaf and dumb not to have caught the mutterings flying around the Combine. No love lost between Sakamoto and Katana Tormark, that was to be sure, and now, perhaps, no love *at all* for the coordinator—and *that* was a different matter.

His eyes fell to his right wrist. He pushed back the folds of his kimono to reveal the chain-link tattoo, done in gold with a Kurita dragon. *The Dragon perfects the circle.*

He debated, then turned to his ship's communications officer. "We will send a message to our brethren. We will inform them of the situation and tell them—we may have need."

16

Command Center, Phoenix, Al Na'ir

Prefecture II, Republic of the Sphere

25 February 3135

There were days when Legate Zachary O'Mallory hated his job. Today was one of them. Pulling a face, he rubbed a hand across his substantial middle—he hadn't seen the toes of his boots in over twenty years—and wished there was something he could take that would make this bellyache go away. He knew there wasn't, though.

So Legate Fuchida in Prefecture I was right after all.

"You're sure," he said. "You're confident of your sources?"

His visitor shrugged. "As much as you can be in this business, yeah. The Dracs are fortifying positions on Buckminster, Gram and Shimosuwa along the border with Prefecture I and Homam, Matar and Klathandu IV along Prefecture III."

"Damn." O'Mallory heaved to his feet and turned to stare out at the city. His office was nearly all windows, and the building a thirty-story pillar, the bull's-eye in a sea of endosteel-and-glass buildings arranged in concentric circles to conform to the shape of the dome just beyond. The weather outside the dome was miserable, of course. The weather on Al Na'ir was always miserable: a combination of dust storms and ion-rich tornadoes swirling in a thin atmosphere of sulfurous poison.

Sighing, O'Mallory ran a hand through his thatch of sand-colored hair. It embarrassed him that he was relieved Al Na'ir wasn't a target. No one in his right mind would want the accursed place anyway. Al Na'ir was rich in mineral wealth, yes, but hardly a vacation spot. The Jihad had been ruinous, devastating the domed cities, allowing the planet's poisonous atmosphere to do its work. The irony was that the

miners, certainly the most wretched of the planet's population, had survived the longest, holing up in settlements deep underground. A simple matter, though, to wait them out. The settlements were not self-sustaining, and the miners who hadn't emerged to be slaughtered by the Blakists were crushed when skillfully placed charges brought their tunnels crashing around their ears.

Pity the poor souls in Prefecture I, though. O'Mallory tucked his hands in his pockets. His fingers stirred loose change. "And their plan?" he asked, without turning around.

"Best intelligence suggests a two-pronged attack. One arm will drive toward Vega. The forces along the Prefecture III border are skeleton troops, with one aim: to lure in Katana Tormark. Once they've got her, her troops will surrender quickly enough."

Well, it was a decent plan at that. If O'Mallory had been leading the campaign, that's how he'd have done it, too; keep everyone guessing. It all added up: the Dracs mobilizing for a strike at Vega, *and* gunning for Katana Tormark, and that was good. With her out of the way, things on Al Na'ir would be a little less dicey. The Tormark situation was a sticky one; Governor Reinaldo Tormark, based in Homai-Zaki Dome, had denounced his second cousin in no uncertain terms, but that didn't mean he was immune to the rumors making the rounds that Tormark was in league with his swashbuckling cousin. Perhaps this Drac invasion was a blessing in disguise, so far as Al Na'ir was concerned.

A little problem, though. O'Mallory chewed on the inside of his left cheek. *Their* forces didn't need more action, what with the exarch's attentions turning toward the Jade Falcon assaults in Prefecture IX, and the continued Capellan problems in V. He and Fuchida might be able to beg, borrow and steal men from the planetary militias of Rukbat and Shitara to beef up support on Tsukude, Altas and Alnasi. Still, they wouldn't be enough if the Dracs came on, full-bore. "What about troop strength? What do the Dracs intend to throw at Vega?"

"Sakamoto's forces will attack within the next two or three months, you can count on that," said his visitor with an air of authority. "As for fighting a war on two fronts, even if one is limited . . . well, I think this will stretch even the Combine's capabilities. The Dracs' trade in black-market 'Mechs really took a beating after that business two years back when Katana Tormark broke up that ring in Prefecture III."

"Yes. Some of those supposedly decommissioned BattleMechs would've come in handy right about now," said O'Mallory. He turned and slid back into his seat, easing his paunch into the gap between chair and desk. "On the other hand, Sakamoto won't have them either."

"Sneaking 'Mechs across the border to Combine space was a pretty lucrative business," his visitor mused. "Makes you wonder if Katana wishes she'd hoarded some of those 'Mechs herself because, let me tell you, her resources are stretched to the limit, if they've not downright run out. I've seen it with my own eyes. Her troops are so low on supplies they're resorting to paint-ball battles, for God's sake. Take my word for it. Sakamoto so much as sneezes at the Fury, the whole thing will topple like a house of cards."

"Some comfort in that," said O'Mallory, his mind toying with the possibility that his people might have the option of sitting this one out. If Sakamoto were gunning for Vega and Katana, Al Na'ir might come out of this without a scratch, and wouldn't that be the best of all possible worlds? He gave his visitor an intent, searching look and could find nothing in the man's face but confidence and a total lack of guile. O'Mallory nodded to himself. That settled it then. He would support Fuchida's request for troops, and then sit back and wait to see what happened. Yes, the best of all possible worlds.

"Thank you for coming forward," he said. He stood and held out his hand. "We can only hope your

information is correct.”

Smiling, Wahab Fusilli stood and grasped O’Mallory’s hand. “Legate, have I ever *once* let you down?”

Conqueror’s Pride, Proserpina

Prefecture III, Republic of the Sphere

20 March 3135

Sully James folded his arms across his barrel chest and watched as the new cook poured a concoction of beaten eggs, sugar and soy sauce onto a hot, rectangular cast-iron omelet skillet sputtering with two, and *only* two, teaspoons of vegetable oil. *Watch him now; the blighter’ll botch it and then won’t I be giving Kat an earful. I ain’t never asked after ’nother cook and don’t want one now.*

Except the new cook didn’t botch it, and when Sully forked a mouthful of tamago into his maw, he was forced to admit that the man knew his way around a kitchen. Sully swallowed, allowed: “You done it fair enough. Where you say you was from again?”

“I didn’t,” said the new man in a nasal country twang. He was sixty-five if he was a day—a sparse nest of thinning white hair, rheumy blue eyes, knobby knuckles and a face that was a road map of wrinkles and folds. “Ran a little place on Galatia III; bar on the south side a town. Troopers get right powerful thirsty after a hard day’s fight.”

“So when did you join?”

“ ’Bout a year after the Fury come to town. Thing I like, Dragon’s Fury don’t seem too partic’lar about where a body’s from nor’n how old a feller is—just whether or not he’s willing to do what needs doing. Well, I’m old.” The new man fetched a smile. “But I can still sling a pretty mean hash. Mainly, though, joined up on account of the missus. *Tai-sho* Tormark’s a mighty fine woman. Makes a man proud to serve.”

“Ain’t no one better’n me Kat, that’s a fact,” said Sully, pleased. He offered his hand. “Sully James. Everyone calls me Sully, or bastard, take your pick.”

“Not half the bastard I am,” said the new man, taking Sully’s hand and wringing it solemnly. “But, for now, the name’s Jake.”

“Jake, you cook as well as you talk, we’ll get along just fine, Bob’s your uncle.”

Jake nodded. “Ye bet yer life.”

23 March 3135

“I’m positive.” Fusilli knocked a cigarette from a pack, screwed it into the corner of his mouth, flicked a lighter to life, inhaled. “Sakamoto will attack Proserpina,” he said, blue smoke jetting from his nostrils. He flicked ash into an empty rice bowl. “*And* make a push for Vega.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” Scowling, Crawford plucked his chopsticks from the general wreckage of luncheon dishes and drummed a fretful rhythm on the low wooden table. “Two fronts? Without HPGs, coordination will be a logistical nightmare.”

“Not if you’ve got enough JumpShips playing tag team, it’s not.” Fusilli turned his attention to Katana. “*Tai-sho*, I’d give my left arm to make this untrue. But Sakamoto *will* invade Prefecture I, and he *will* strike Proserpina.”

Katana’s scowl was the mirror image of Crawford’s. “What about the coordinator?”

“No one knows where the coordinator or his son stand.”

Chu-sa Liz Magruder, Katana’s field commander from Sadachbia, grunted a laugh. She was a tall woman with close-cropped blond hair, and a snub nose that was too small for her height and made her always look disdainful. “No news there.”

“We don’t know that Sakamoto hasn’t gotten the official go-ahead,” countered Wesley Parks. The field commander, *asho-sa*, hailed from Sirius. He was scrappy and compact, with a black beard liberally streaked with gray and as gnarly as a briar patch, a scar that bisected his left eyebrow and a chipped front tooth, the right. When he smiled, he looked downright sinister. “If *we* know, you’ve got to believe the coordinator does.”

“And doing nothing,” said Crawford. He’d progressed from drumming *torat-tat-tat-tapping* his chopsticks together, ignoring the arched eyebrows from *Sho-sa* Ichiyo Rusch, a terminally dyspeptic man with a hatchet face who was one hell of a good MechWarrior and commanded the Dragon’s Fury contingent stationed at Irian, and *Chu-sa* Hampton Rhodes from Galatia III. “He’ll just look the other way, let Sakamoto do his thing then make a speech and hang a medal around the guy’s neck.”

Presuming he still has a neck to hang something around. Katana glanced at her other guests: *Sho-sa* Thaddeus Hiwari from Ronel and Abeda Measho. Hiwari looked undecided, and Measho was frowning. *And the Old Master’s been pretty quiet.* She snuck a peek at the old man who stood sentry at the *shoji*, but he gave no sign and she turned back to Measho. “Well?”

Measho hesitated and his dark eyes regarded Fusilli a moment before coming to rest on Katana. “I am not a commander, or a politician,” he said in his slow, deliberate way. “But isn’t the coordinator’s silence the reason you’ve pushed yourself and us so hard? When we began, we claimed nothing for the Combine, not a world, not a system. But now we claim for the coordinator. Perhaps the coordinator is silent because there are choices, but they are only ones that you can make and they must be of your free will, without influence. I’m sorry, but I don’t think we can help you with that.”

Measho was right. Katana knew it. No one said anything for the space of few seconds, and then Crawford looked at Measho. “So does that mean you don’t know?”

The rest burst out in relieved laughter. But Katana sobered quickly. “Measho’s right, as usual. But a head-to-head confrontation with Sakamoto is out of the question.”

“Yeah, we’d get squashed into grease smears.” Parks tugged at his salt-and-pepper beard. “Why don’t we join forces?”

Rusch screwed up his face as if he’d smelled something very bad. “Oh, I’m sure Sakamoto’d be happy

to have us tag along, seeing as how he's massing forces across our border."

"Okay, it doesn't look so hot," said Parks. "But he's got to worry about cutting his losses same as us, and what do we have to lose? We stay out of the fight, Sakamoto chops those Republic forces into sushi, and we've still got those guys across the border. Now, on the other hand, if *hereally* intended to strike at us here, then I'd lay odds he wouldn't leave his people undermanned, not if he's serious."

Rusch looked unconvinced, but Magruder slowly nodded. "Okay, I can see that." She combed her close-cropped hair with her fingers then looked over at Fusilli. "Sowhat about that? Those guys bait, or a warning?"

Fusilli squinted through smoke curls. "Neither. They're going to attack . . ."

"Wait a sec," said Katana, cutting him off. "Magruder's got a point. I was stupid not to see it before. Think about it for a second. Put yourself in their place. Your commander's just got done telling you that you'll have one hell of a good fight and you're so important and blah, blah, blah. But then you get stuck hell and gone, so far away that not only are you cut off from the main force, you've got no prospect for backup if something *does* happen. If they're undermanned, then we're more than evenly matched."

Fusilli sucked, then stabbed out his smoke in a rice bowl. "I hadn't considered that. But, come to think of it, *thatcould* explain something else."

"And that is?"

"The troops across our border are undermanned, yeah, but they're *realso* full of *yakuza* conscripts."

"Criminals?" Crawford said. *Rat-tatta-tat* .

"These aren't just any old *yakuza* ; they're the descendants of the old Ghost Regiments, the ones the first Theodore created a century ago. The Ghost Regiments have been disbanded, of course, along with a fair number of the Combine's regular forces. But, don't you get it? If Sakamoto's turning over rocks looking for troops, then he's *got* to be acting without the coordinator's consent, maybe even his knowledge. Otherwise, the coordinator would just *give* him troops."

Ratatattat-tat. "I still don't see how this helps us." *Rat-tattat-tat*.

"Will you *quit* that?" asked Parks.

"It helps me think," said Crawford, but he tossed his chopsticks onto the table before him. "There. Satisfied?"

"Very."

"Guys, put a sock in it," said Katana. "Go, Fusilli."

"Like I was saying, I think this helps us," said Fusilli. "I heard that the guys on Homam and Matar are really pissed off. Morale's in the toilet."

"So you're saying they might be turned." Katana smoothed her lips with her forefinger, thinking. "Interesting idea."

“Criminals?” said Rusch again, sounding even more disparaging than before. “Gangsters?”

“Soldiers,” Katana corrected. “Personally, I have no objection to anyone who wants to join the party. It’s not as if we’re just overflowing with troops.”

“So it’s an interesting idea,” said Parks. “So how do we test it?”

“I’m not sure. In the meantime, let’s play it safe but smart. Andre, you and Magruder send what reinforcements you can to Proserpina. Don’t gut yourselves, but if Sakamoto’s men strike Proserpina, I want to have a little bit more muscle, maybe make them think twice. Your border’s been pretty quiet anyway, what with the Steel Wolves and Swordsworn having deserted Shinonoi, Deneb Algedi and Telos IV.”

Magruder nodded, but Crawford was shaking his head again. He began twirling one of his chopsticks like a baton. “You’re banking on The Republic being deaf, dumb, blind and stupid.”

“Well, they are,” said Parks.

Crawford ignored him. “They could turn right around and launch a push to retake Ancha and Sadachbia. And don’t say it.” This he directed to Parks, who was eyeing the twirling chopstick. “I haven’t tapped it once.”

“I was just making sure.”

Katana cut in. “We’ll just have to take our chances that they don’t want to, or can’t. War’s about risk; you want something nice and safe, then you didn’t read the job description. Fusilli, I want you to go back with Magruder to Sadachbia. Our job now is to consolidate and get ready for a fight.”

Parks’ fingers were busy in his beard. “Well, now that you mention it, *Tai-sho*, there’s been *alot* of channel chatter down our way from Prefecture V, about action down by Poznan, even Liao. Nothing definite, you understand, but from the sounds of things, there’s thinning of Republic ranks on Liberty and Eridani. We could make a stab at those worlds, try and get them under our belt.”

“I don’t like it,” said Crawford.

Parks glared. “I didn’t ask you.”

“And I still don’t like it.”

“Andre,” said Katana, and then gave Parks a rueful shake of the head. “Nice as it sounds, no can do, Parks. We’re going to have our hands full when *andif* Sakamoto shows up. But if what you say is true, Parks, then Bannson’s Raiders on Saffel and Athenry might push into Prefecture X based on the same information.”

“Meaning we get to stay put,” said Parks, and then nodded at Rusch. “You, too.”

“Just as well.” Rusch snorted. “We’re already down a ’Mech and not a shot fired. *Tai-sho*, *Itold* you the BH wasn’t reliable.”

Crawford’s eyebrows reached for the hairline of his ruddy mane. “You mean, he’s gone?”

“Vanished,” said Rusch. “Poof.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to mention the Bounty Hunter’s early-morning visit to her bedroom, but Katana bit it back. What had he said? Something very odd: *A lot of bad eggs floating around* . A turn of a phrase she’d dismissed, but now, getting conflicting reports and confusing signals, she wasn’t at all sure that the Bounty Hunter wasn’t trying, in his own inimitable fashion, to warn her about something. A traitor, perhaps? “One MechWarrior more or less isn’t going to turn the tide of any battle, Rusch.”

Rusch looked unconvinced, but Parks said, “So I guess I’m not going to fight. Damn, I was kind of hoping for one.”

“You might just get your wish,” said Katana with a grim smile. “And, Parks, it’s never a good day to fight. It’s only a good day when you’ve won.”

Katana dismissed her field commanders. “All except you, Andre,” she said, then waited until the rest filed out, Parks shooting Crawford a look: *I told you to stop tapping with those damn things and now see what happens* . The Old Master pulled the squallingshoji shut and returned to his post.

Katana took a moment, debating how to begin. Crawford didn’t help her, just sat, arms folded, damn him. “So how is Toni doing?” she said, forcing a lightness into her tone that she didn’t feel.

“She’s angry,” said Crawford. “She’s hurt. About what you’d expect.”

Katana felt her cheeks flush. “I understand that, but what I want to know is how she’s doing, MechWarrior-wise.”

“*Ooohhhhhh. That* . She’s doing much better, thanks. Not enough so I’d stake my life on it, but she’s getting there. I think she’ll be okay when the going gets tough. And speaking of going, what are you going to do next?”

Sighing, Katana pushed to her feet and began to pace in the space backed by an elaborate tapestry: an embroidered dragon with an amethyst eye. “I don’t know. Just when I think I understand Sakamoto’s strategy, it gets away from me. You said it. It’s that damn distance between the forces.”

“Put yourself in his shoes. It may be no more complicated than that he’s installed commanders he trusts to get the job done.”

“Mmmm,” said Katana. “And there was something else really weird. What’s the only planet Fusilli didn’t mention? Across the border, I mean?”

Crawford thought for a second, said, “Klathandu IV.”

“Klathandu’s just as close. Maybe closer than Homam and Matar.”

“And your point?”

“Why aren’t those forces on Klathandu?”

“Maybe there aren’t.”

“But maybe there *are*. Think about it. Fusilli *knows* about the Ghost Regiments; *he knows* about the drive for Vega; *he knows* the names of very specific planets. So how come *he doesn't know this?*”

Crawford pushed out his lower lip. “Well, now you put it that way, okay, I see your point. Doesn't mean his information's wrong.”

“But maybe he was compromised; maybe someone found out he works for us. So maybe . . .”

Crawford's face brightened. “Maybe information got leaked with an eye toward forcing our hand, or baiting a trap. We get all hot and bothered about Homam and Matar, and then the guys on Klathandu slip in behind and clobber the hell out of us. *Or* Sakamoto takes Vega while you hunker down on Proserpina. Once Vega's in Sakamoto's hip pocket, then Sakamoto goes back to the coordinator and says, see, here I've brought you all this glory and Katana's been too chicken to join in the fun. Okay,” said Crawford, giving a slow nod. “I can buy that. Still doesn't answer the question about Klathandu IV, though. *I* could go to Klathandu . . . why the hell not?”

Katana was shaking her head. “Because I need you on Ancha. No arguments,” she said when he opened his mouth to protest. “Whoever planted this information for Fusilli to pick up aimed to have me *steer away* from Klathandu. Makes sense. But Klathandu is the closest and most isolated of the three planets on the border. So I'll go there.”

“Let me go with you.”

“Nope. Just me and”—she glanced over her shoulder—“and the Old Master. When *he* speaks, they'll listen.”

She saw that Crawford struggled with this one; his face had turned a shade of red only slightly lighter than his mane of fiery hair. “I don't think that's wise,” he said, finally and pushed to his feet. “If the commander on Klathandu isn't on the up and up, you'll be in front of the coordinator in ten seconds flat and, twenty seconds later, your head will be looking at the inside of a refrigerated box. If something happens to you . . .”

“If I'm taken, you go to the head of the class. You're the one man I trust to do this right. I'll give you all time to get back to your various posts. Then I'll head for Klathandu IV and see if I can persuade their commander to see things our way.”

“You're assuming a hell of a lot. Look, I'd never disobey you, but I'm begging you. At least wait until we hear from Drexel and McCain. If Sakamoto's persuaded other *yakuza*, maybe Drexel and McCain will . . .”

“We can't afford to wait, and I haven't heard from them in months. Junction was a gamble, anyway.”

“You should've let me go.”

“McCain was . . . *is* best for the job, and the least conspicuous. He doesn't look like a soldier, or a spy, and Viki blends in enough to cover his rear. After all, I'm not sure I'd want to be on the receiving end of your scalpel.” When he didn't laugh, she said, “Look, either they haven't sent word because there's nothing to report, or . . .”

“They're dead,” said Crawford, flatly.

Katana nodded. "Yeah."

In a back storeroom of the kitchens, next to the refrigerated meat locker, Jake straightened. There was a smile on Jake's face, and that was the curious thing. Jake's face was old, but his smile was not. After a quick glance to make sure there was no one around, Jake plucked a tiny receiver from his right ear and dropped it into a pocket of his long, white apron. Then he tugged open a sack, scooped rice into a basin and made his way back to the kitchens.

An hour later, Jake, wicker basket looped over one arm, wandered the city's central market. March was a good month on Proserpina; the days were still warm but the nights cooled enough to require a light sweater. It was close to six, and the market was very busy this time of day, people picking out fresh produce for that evening's supper, or simply out enjoying an evening stroll. Jake squeezed melons, sniffed the spiked orange-yellow skin of Helenian passion fruit. Jake stopped at one vendor and pointed at a box of passion fruit neatly arrayed on green-and-white tissue paper. "Are they local, or imports?"

The vendor, a round-faced woman with a ruddy nose, snorted. "Imports, a' course."

"But I heard Helen had a poor summer, bone dry."

The vendor narrowed her eyes. "Well, that's true. But it rained late."

"Well, ya put it that way . . ." Jake selected four passion fruits and dropped them into his basket.

"Two for a bill," she said. Jake pressed the money into her hand, and she slipped the bill into her pocket. "Come again now."

Jake smiled, bobbed his head. Then he turned and shuffled on his way.

Another customer wandered by the fruit vendor a half hour later. "Local or imported?"

"Imports," the vendor said promptly. "From Helen, they are, and none finer."

"But I heard that Helen was very dry."

"A late rain, that's what they say."

"Oh." The young man looked dubious, then pointed again. "What about these lemons?"

"Oh, they's from Mallory's World."

"Mmmm." The young man thought, said, "I'll take two passion fruits."

"Coming right up." The vendor selected two, wrapped them in tissue paper and handed them over. "Two for a bill and bless ya, sir."

"Right." The young man turned and strolled through the market until he came to an open-air café. Round green metal tables dotted a square, red-brick patio, and the young man took an open table furthest from the market thoroughfare, with his back to the wall of the café. He ordered hot tea, with lemon, no sugar.

When the tea came, steaming hot with a wedge of lemon on the side, the young man waited until the server had moved on then dug out his passion fruits. He peeled off the tissue paper, smoothed it on the table, glanced right then left. Then he took up the wedge of lemon, held it over the paper, and squeezed. Nothing happened . . . and then a single word appeared, in black: *Junction*.

Fishing out his lighter, Wahab Fusilli flicked it to life, then held the paper over the flame and watched as the edges curled, blackened and the entire square burned to ash. He sideswiped the ash with one hand, then dug out his pack from his breast pocket, shook out a smoke, lit it. Inhaled and smiled.

Now was an *excellent* time to make his reports to his many masters.

Waddesdon Nadir Jump Point

Benjamin Military District, Draconis Combine

22 April 3135

There really was nothing in the galaxy more beautiful than JumpShips poised to unleash an assault. They were arrayed in a rough V shape, his ship the point of the arrow. Waddesdon's sun brushed the massive JumpShips' hulls with a delicate wash of light, turning them silver, and Sakamoto thought he had never seen anything so wonderful.

He shifted slightly, the soles of his gripshoes unzipping from the gripcarpet then remeshing with a sound like fabric tearing in two. He inhaled. He'd always hated JumpShip air; it smelled like burned cordite mingled with ozone, but today was a good day to be alive. To command was good. To do battle was better.

Four months ago, he'd had power, of course. *A warlord is power's synonym, and now I shall wield mine. Let every living being taste my wrath for I will allow no sanction, no quarter.* He was unconscious of the smile that spread along his lips. Well, and the *oyabuns* had grumbled, hadn't they? But he'd beaten them, as he knew he would. Those *oyabuns*, they *yakuza*, they were like pack rats or chipmunks, never throwing anything away. So they'd delivered, and in such quantity! Enough troops to swell Sakamoto's available manpower by half; enough to keep some troops in reserve against any attempt to reduce his power base or eliminate Sakamoto himself. Not to mention JumpShips. *Monoliths!* *Chimeishos!* And two *Starlords!* Oh, Sakamoto bet there was a story behind those little beauties. And there were 'Mechs, not those lowly, refitted construction 'Mechs either, but the real deal; tanks, Gauss rifles, hand weapons, and even a baker's dozen of VTOL.

And if his own troops grumbled at their *yakuza* compatriots, he didn't care so long as they got the job done. The best way to defeat their *yakuzas'* loyalty to one another was to divide and conquer. Otherwise, they'd be, well, as thick as thieves. Privately he understood and had, very quietly, assured his commanders that, in the end, *yakuza* were *not* their equals. Use them as PPC fodder, he'd said with a wink and a nod. Better them than DCMS men any day.

At the pilot's station ahead and to the right, there came a soft burble of an alarm. "JumpShip on approach, *Tai-shu*," the pilot announced. "Ten seconds."

As Sakamoto watched, the space beyond his ships wavered as if the void were about to melt. The light from the stars around the distortion subtended then broke into rainbows as space folded, contracted, opened and coughed out a *Magellan* -class JumpShip.

“Message coming in,” said the pilot. He paused, then added: “I’m informed that it’s prerecorded, audio only.”

Sakamoto nodded. “Play it.”

A soft crackle saturated the sudden, preternatural stillness on the bridge, as if each crew member was holding his breath. Then, a voice, male: “Greetings, *Tai-shu* Sakamoto. Katana Tormark’s agents are on Junction and will be dealt with. By now the traitor herself is en route for Klathandu IV, but she goes only with an old man for company. The rest of her commanders have returned to their posts. Your path is clear. May your day end in victory and honor.”

Sakamoto waited for more but there was nothing because nothing more was required. Turning in a slow half circle, he scanned the faces of the bridge crew: the communications officer, weapons, tactical. At last he came to Worridge, who stood a little behind and to his right. Worridge stood tall in her battle uniform; her features were expressionless.

Ah, and you’re a deep one, Tai-sho. His eyes crawled over her face, searching for weakness or doubt, and finding none. *So long as you do my bidding, you may have your private thoughts in that head of yours—else you might find yourself without a head to store anything in.*

Worridge frowned slightly when Sakamoto grinned. “*Tai-shu?*”

“Nothing.” He waved the comment away, then clasped his hands behind his back and addressed the bridge crew. “The coordinator assured me that I should not act until the time is right. Well, I say there is no time like the present. Captain?” He looked toward the ship’s command chair. “If you will be so good as to go to battle stations.”

Then, as the ship’s comm came alive, Sakamoto nodded at Worridge. “*Now.*”

Sharpendale Airspace, Uranday, Chichibu

Prefecture II, Republic of the Sphere

26 April 3135

At 0300, Major Todd Hammond made love to his wife. At 0430, he stood over his infant daughter’s crib. When he bent to kiss her round little cheek, he inhaled an aroma of sweet talc and warm milk, and he lingered for another moment, fixing the smell in his mind. At 0515, there was a preflight briefing, and he sat in a metal chair so cold the chill leeches into his bones. And at 0720, Major Todd Hammond got ready to die.

Another blast of swirling turbulence crashed into the aerospace fighter head-on, punching the nose of his craft with a ferocity that shuddered into Hammond’s teeth. The *Lucifer*’s engines let out a high sputtering whine, like the coughing turbine of a motor about to stall. Cursing, Hammond grappled with his stick as the fighter bucked, lost angels, and then heaved heavenward again. Thank Christ, he wasn’t flying the lighter *Sparrowhawk*; battling goo like this would be what a pea felt like being shaken in an empty tin can, and Hammond supposed that, all things considered, he ought to be grateful for this at least. The

Sparrowhawk flew recon ahead of Hammond's flight, TACAN sweeping the upper atmosphere for bearing and slant range. Find the suckers, and then the *Sparrowhawk* was to fall back and get the hell out of Dodge without getting vaporized—if it could.

The storm had been a surprise, though not as surprising as what had happened four days ago when the Dracs flickered into existence. Caught everyone with their britches down and picking their noses. Two JumpShips, with near enough DropShips to wipe out the whole planet, if that's what the Dracs had in mind. Given that a lance of Republic aerospace fighters had been reduced to subatomic dust a day ago . . . well, you could say that was a pretty clear message of Drac intent. Loud and clear.

Of course, none of this was supposed to happen. With all the commotion the Dracs were raising over the border with Prefecture I, and the rumors about them going after Tormark in III, no one was prepared, least of all The Republic's Central Command, what with all their fighters pulled back to deal with chasing after the Steel Wolves and Swordsworn. Whoever'd made that really bright move essentially quashed any hope of Chichibu being able to mount anything you might call resistance. Chichibu's planetary militia had always been a joke, skeletal at best. So Command had decided to defend the planet, rather than trying to take the Dracs out near the jump point: specifically, Hammond's lance, and another flying mop-up a thousand klicks back led by a guy named Kirk Jameson. Hammond didn't know Jameson well. Had figured he had plenty of time to get to know him. Probably, given how things were going, he'd figured wrong.

Everyone was going in hot, Hammond in the lead, their *Lucifers* nearly line abreast in a finger-four. They knifed through thick roiling masses of ionized clouds that worked both ways—a blessing and a curse, one of those good for goose and gander kind of things. Sure, he couldn't see worth shit, and his sensors had been reduced to green-and-red jittering hash, with only the *Sparrowhawk* and his lance clearly visible because he'd ordered they stay two hundred klicks apart, a distance roughly equivalent to a *Lucifer*'s turn radius. Elbow room for maneuvering and attack; no sense in their making tac turns only to fly up each other's tailpipes.

His comm wasn't much better: a mishmash of gabbled voices sifted through static that he only half registered because none of the Command-babble was worth a good goddamn. The only thing that brightened his day was the sure knowledge that if things were bad for him, they had to be just as bad for the Dracs. Maybe.

A crackle in his headset: "Ray 36 . . . ine . . . acts . . . ight . . . spect!"

The *Sparrowhawk*, or the pilot, was reporting contact. "Say again, Ray 36," barked Hammond. "Say again."

Fizzle, pop, then a splutter: "Ray 36 . . . nine . . . forty right . . . sixty klicks, high . . . hot . . . !" Spritz, crackle, and then Hammond glanced at his sensors and saw that the little red speck that had been the *Sparrowhawk* was gone. But Hammond understood: nine contacts, forty degrees right, sixty klicks, high aspect.

For a brief instant, as he prepared his flight to turn hard right to intercept, a stream of memory burned a trail across his consciousness, like the bright streak of a meteor. He felt the good, warm body of his wife in his arms, the feel of his daughter's hair, the softness of his wife's lips and the way they tasted. He remembered fingers of wind on his cheeks and the wonder of a leaf in his hand. He remembered living. He remembered his life. It had been a good one.

Major Todd Hammond said, "Ray 31 flight, check forty right, throttle up, now!"

No one acknowledged, but they didn't have to. They turned, and Hammond fired his aft thrusters. A lion's roar of power competed with the violence of the storm, and a giant fist punched Hammond against his seat as his *Lucifer* leapt into battle. The sudden g s left him light-headed for a giddy instant, and he grunted automatically, raising his vascular pressure with an instinctive Valsalva maneuver that forced blood back into his brain until his g -suit compensated. His *Lucifer* gobbled up air, and he was climbing, climbing . . .

And then it was as if the Dracs materialized out of a thick mist: first the churning clouds, and then a queer red glow lighting the atmosphere with fire, and then Hammond's contact alarms screamed. A rain of ruby red laser fire sliced the air, dancing around Hammond's canopy. The lasers were so close their glare burned through Hammond's protective visor and left purple afterimages sizzling on his retinas. The Dracs thundered out of the clouds, nine strong, their lasers darting ahead like fiery tongues, followed by the massive hulk of the DropShip close behind.

"Mother of God," said Hammond, and even as his computer shrilled that the Dracs were acquiring; even as his lance broke formation for evasive maneuvers; even as the air over his canopy burned—he knew.

It would be the last prayer he'd ever say.

Tranquil Seas Resort, Tranquil Bay

Shangai, Shinonoi

Prefecture II, Republic of the Sphere

6 May 3135

Oh, and to hell with Phillip. Sherry Platt squeezed a puddle of sunscreen into the palm of her right hand. She worked the sunscreen into her left shoulder, wincing as beach grit sanded her skin. When had anyone ever accused Phillip of listening to a word she said? If she'd told him once, she'd said it a hundred times: *For God's sake, put on some sunscreen so you don't end up like a boiled lobster* .

But *nooooo* . Sherry massaged more goo onto her legs and the flabby, fish-belly white rolls of her stomach. Capping the sunscreen with a sharp snick, Sherry flopped back onto her towel and squinted. The sun was very bright today, bright enough to bring tears. She shaded her eyes with her right hand. Perfect beach weather, not a cloud in the sky, blue as far as the eye could see. Blue sky, blue water, white sand . . . *Finally* , Phillip gets some time off, and they go to the beach, and then what does Phillip do? Phillip doesn't listen. Phillip doesn't use sunscreen. Phillip spent four hours in the sun yesterday, and now Phillip was flopped like a beached whale on their beautiful king-size bed—and a Jacuzzi included, too, she could have killed for a Jacuzzi bath; you could sail a yacht in that Jacuzzi, and the sex! But no sex now, not with Phillip's skin flash-cooked to the color of a boiled lobster. No, redder than that, as red as a fire truck, that was how red.

Sherry flicked sand from her nails—green, this month. Some vacation, with her watching Polly solo and . . . Sherry paused, frowned. Come to think of it, where *was* Polly? She pushed to a sit, then struggled to her feet. Hummocks of sand tilted and slewed under her feet and made her wobble like a drunk. Sherry shaded her eyes and peered left down the strip of white beach. The sand was so hot the far horizon shimmered like a mirage. There was a forest of gaily colored umbrellas and oiled bodies strewn at haphazard angles on towels, but no Polly. To the right, there were more umbrellas, a volleyball net, the lifeguard's high wooden platform, and a bank of portable toilets snuggled beneath the underbelly

of a boardwalk. Then, straight ahead, she spotted a blue polka-dotted bum and two dimpled legs standing at the water's edge.

"Polly!" But Polly didn't turn; probably couldn't hear her over the noise of the sea. Exasperated, Sherry picked her way around bodies that reeked of suntan oil and sweat. "Polly?"

This time, Polly turned. Her sunglasses slid to the nub of her nose. They were child's sunglasses, the kind with mermaids at the corners and tangles of colored plastic seaweed along the brows. "Look, Mommy!" Polly jabbed a chubby finger up at the sky. "*Stars!*"

"The sun's out," said Sherry, crossly. "When I call, I expect you to snap to. Come on." She clamped a hand around Polly's left wrist. "We'll play . . ."

"Nooooo!" Polly went rubber-chicken limp, slewing sideways as dead weight. A neat kid's trick that made Sherry stagger. "Lookit the stars, lookit the *stars!*"

Now, other bathers at the water's edge were turning to gawk. Mortified, Sherry hauled back on her sagging daughter. *Snapshot: mother with screaming child*. If there hadn't been so many people around, Sherry would probably have let go. "All right, *alright!* If I look at the stars, will you come along?"

The transformation was immediate. Polly beamed and scrambled to her feet. "There!" she cried, pointing at a spot behind Sherry's shoulder and high to the right.

Sighing, Sherry turned, shaded her eyes, and looked. Seawater foamed around her ankles. *The things you do for kids* . . . Then, she stopped thinking, felt her stomach get cold, the warmth drain out of her toes and soak into the sand.

"Pretty!" Squealing, Polly clapped in excitement as the shooting stars screamed toward the sea. "Pretty!"

"Oh, God." That was all Sherry said, and then the roar of the fighters' sonic boom rolled like thunder, and with so much force that Sherry felt the impact in her chest.

And then, the stars opened fire.



Two Forks, Junction

Benjamin Military District, Draconis Combine

Evening, 10 May 3135

The café was named Cuppa Joe, and McCain smelled the place a block before he saw it: an aroma of freshly brewed coffee mingled with spicy cinnamon. He sucked in a lungful, grateful at the prospect of a really good cup of coffee and the freedom to walk without keepers trailing a discreet distance behind. The café was located in a cobblestone walking district that ran for seven blocks north and south, and four blocks east and west. Pedestrians and vendors only: no hovercraft, not even a bicycle. The evening was

cool enough to be just the other side of brisk; the streets were jammed with people loitering before shop windows or wandering aimlessly; street performers strummed guitars or did magic tricks; clots of tables set in outdoor patios were filled with couples eating, talking, drinking.

Cuppa Joe's red-brick exterior was the last of a string of storefronts on that particular block, and packed, natch. But then he spied an empty table set back along the wall and at the corner: dark green lacquer with spindle legs and two black wrought-iron chairs. Sauntering over, his eyes flicked to a soft pack propped against the bricks:*Lucky*. When he looked, he saw eight smokes left, filter-tipped.

Luck be a lady. As McCain slipped the pack into the front pocket of his leather jacket, he felt eyes on his back and, turning, he met the frankly curious inspection of a young couple the next table over. McCain gave a sheepish smile, shrugged. "Trying to quit, but you know . . ." Trailing off, he shrugged again to put a period on it.

"Mmmm." The woman, a nondescript brunette with hair down to her waist and hoop earrings trimmed with beads, eyed him, then turned her attention back to her date.

The coffee was black and tall, and just as good as he remembered; strong and laced with chicory. He sipped, scalded his mouth, put the cup—one of those heavy white ceramic jobs—aside to cool.

It had been touch and go for a while, but Akata, the kid he'd been commandeered to treat, pulled through. Somewhere along the way, Muscle, aka Tony Ito, decided McCain was on the up and up because he'd made a proposal: work for them. That the "them" was *theyakuza* clan *Ryuu-gumi*, Family of the Dragon, was precisely the break McCain and Drexel had been hoping for. But McCain played his part, feigning reluctance until Ito pointed out that the hospital would be unlikely to rehire a recovering drunk who'd disappeared for almost five months.

"Okay, you got me there," McCain had said. It had been evening, and Ito had invited him to share a pot of green tea—an offer McCain wanted to but could not refuse. During the preceding months he'd had enough green tea to float a battleship. The sacrifices one made for duty . . . "But I'm not exactly sure that working for a drug cartel is a step up."

Ito, indignant. "Sure, yeah, I'm *Waka-gashira*, but no way I'm gonna be Number Two running drugs. Man, you been reading too many novels, you know. Not every *yakuza*'s *Kabuki-mono*."

"I didn't say you were crazy." McCain had held up his hands, palm out. "But I'm crawling out from under here. I need to stay squeaky clean."

"Yeah?" Screwing a cigarette into the corner of his mouth, Ito'd scratched a match to life, sucked in. "How fast you think you gonna get hired back when you don't show for work for four, five months, huh?" said Ito, his voice strangled around a lungful of smoke. "Man, they gonna think you were off on some bender." Twin gray streamers flowed from his nose. "You never gonna work there again."

"But there are other hospitals, other planets."

"Yeah, sure." Ito let out a horsey snort. His eyes slitted against smoke, and when he spoke, his cigarette marked time. "When they ask you for references, what you gonna say? Look, this is a good gig. Good money, good life, no malpractice."

Then it had been McCain's turn to smirk. "Except I say no, next thing I know I'm sleeping with fishes."

McCain remembered the brief flare of violence in Ito's dark eyes, there and gone quick as a flash of lightning, and for an instant McCain thought he'd gone too far. But then Ito relaxed, laughed, settled back into his shell of smoke. "Man, don't say no until I take you to meet someone."

Only it hadn't been just someone, but Matsuuro *Kamikuro* . In. The. Flesh.

Just what the doctor ordered. Cupping his coffee mug in his hands, McCain allowed himself a moment's satisfaction. Yes, now he had an in with the *Ryuu-gumi*'s elderly *yabun* , but he couldn't make the next move without Viki Drexel, and what the devil was keeping her? McCain let his gaze wander aimlessly right, and then left, his eyes flitting from one anonymous face to the next. *The pack's here; that's the signal, eight cigs for eight o'clock and it's quarter past now, so where . . . ?*

Then he saw something very familiar: a wheeled cart rounding the far corner. McCain's chest spiked with hope. The tamago lady's cart, heading his way; had to be, so maybe Viki was sending word through their cutout. Christ, this espionage stuff was for the birds, all the hoops . . . Impatient now, McCain watched the cart's slow progress up the block. Twilight had given way to true night, and so he couldn't quite make out the color of the awning or the woman's face, but he thought the cart was right, except he wouldn't know for sure until the cart got closer.

The cart drew almost but not quite even with Cuppa Joe, opting for a bank of inky shadow just beyond a cone of yellow light from a streetlamp. Too far away for McCain to pin down the awning or make out the woman, damn it. He'd have to go see.

Scraping back his chair, McCain stood. A moment later, the young couple also rose. The couple turned left; McCain headed right, and as he passed their table, his gaze skidded over and registered the curl of a paper sack beneath the chair where the brunette with the hoop earrings had been—and then flitted away as the tamago lady's back came into view. He continued on, forgot the sack.

Bad mistake.

Two meters from the cart, McCain was just able to pick out the awning's colors. Red and yellow. *Hot damn* . But then there was movement, and the tamago woman turned, came out of shadow. McCain froze in midstride, the smile melting off his face. Because *she was ahe* .

McCain had time for one startled half thought: *Holy sh* . . .

Then, a shout to his right and just behind: "McCain, down, *down!*"

The man at the cart flinched, but McCain was already diving left at the same moment that there was a loud *crack* . Something hummed in the air, cutting a seam just above McCain's scalp. McCain hit the brick hard, absorbed the force of the blow in a shoulder roll and righted onto the balls of his feet just in time to see the man at the cart jerk, backpedal two steps, then fall.

There was a moment of absolute, stunned silence . . . and then the café erupted in a stampede of screaming patrons. Crockery crashed to the brick patio as tables and chairs were butted out of the way. Someone kicked over the paper sack just off to McCain's right, and he half saw something round tumble out—*an egg, is that an egg, what the hell's an egg* . . .—and then he was pivoting, still crouched, looking right.

Viki Drexel was tearing down the street, right arm cocked at the elbow, straight-arming a path through fleeing patrons with her left. "McCain, stay down, take cover! Stay down, stay . . .!"

Jesus. McCain looked at the egg, the sack, the cart, and it all clicked into place like tumblers in a lock: Bomb, Jesus Mother Mary Joseph, the bag, it's a . . . !

And then he was up, launching his body in a running dive for the nearest table—one that was lying on its side, round surface propped like a bulwark—hitting the deck so hard the breath whooshed from his lungs . . . just as the bomb went off.

Awhump , a sound the same as throwing a match into paper soaked with gasoline, followed by a smell of something burning and a whirring noise, more sensation than sound. Crouched behind the table, head tucked into his chest and arms over his neck, McCain heard the crackle of glass breaking, the papery rustle of leaves being shredded, and wet splats like grapes being squashed as flechettes tore into flesh, and more screaming. Then, at his ear, a series of dull *pock-pock-pocks* , as the flechettes struck metal. Then—they stopped.

McCain waited a second, then two and slowly lifted his head and peered around the table. Flechettes quivered in the wrought iron like porcupine's quills. Further on, he saw the still, sprawled figure of the man, and to the right, in the cone of the streetlamp, an oozing tongue of something black and thick as oil.

Panting, Drexel dropped beside McCain. "You okay?" she asked, pushing hair from her face with the back of one hand.

"Yeah." McCain arched sweat from his forehead. He heard the faint wail of sirens mingling with the cries of the wounded. "Jesus, how did you know?"

Wordlessly, Drexel pulled a peeled hardboiled egg from a pocket of her jacket and turned it over so McCain could read the message.

A single word, in black: Bad.



Lake Marshall, Junction

10 May 3135

Ito stopped talking, and the study, a room filled with books and comfortable red-brown leather chairs, was so quiet that when McCain swallowed he heard the click in his throat. Matsuro Kamikuro, head of the *Ryuu-gumi* clan, didn't say a word. Instead, he stared at McCain. "I see," said Kamikuro, finally, though his tone was cold as iced steel. "But you will tell me, please, why you and your friend"—a nod toward Drexel—"are important enough to kill?"

A damn good question. *Well, see, we're sorta spies, and oh, yeah, by the way, man, I'm really sorry we had to contract some guy to shoot up your people some, but war is hell and . . .* McCain hesitated then said, "Because, Kamikuro-san, our enemies want the coordinator to fall."

"Indeed." Kamikuro had small, almond-shaped eyes that had once been bright blue, but that age had faded to the same sharkskin gray as his suit and hair. He looked every millimeter the highly successful businessman, not the *oyabun* of a powerful *yakuza* family. "And you are . . . ?"

“My name is still Matthew McCain, and I am still a doctor, but I am also *achu-sa*. I serve *Tai-sho* Katana Tormark.”

Kamikuro’s eyes shifted to Drexel. “And you?”

“Viki Drexel.”

Kamikuro looked impressed. “*You*, I know. You pilot a *Shockwave*, am I correct?”

“*Hai*, Kamikuro-san,” said Drexel, and she executed a quick bow so well that McCain wished he’d thought of that, too.

“Most impressive.” He returned his attention to McCain. “What makes you believe that we have the resources *ordesire* to serve your cause?”

“I admit that I can’t be certain of your resources, Kamikuro-san, but you have the desire. Your father served with Wing Commander *Sho-sa* Thaddeus Shotoko of the Seventh Ghost Regiment, those who were Cleansed by Dragon’s Dark Passing; and you said it yourself: *Ryuu-gumi* is not *Kabuki-mono*, but *Machi-yakko*. Your men keep order.”

“Just because we serve the people, it does not follow that we serve the coordinator.”

“But you *are* bound by honor, and you honor your past. Your family’s *sirezumi* binds you.” McCain nodded at the gold chain-link tattoo on Ito’s right wrist and the hint of the same that was just visible beyond the gray cuff at Kamikuro’s wrist. “It’s the same as the emblem the Seventh painted on its Mechs.”

“Phantoms of the past. The Ghost Regiments were disbanded, the men scattered throughout the Combine. Whatever factions remain, they serve at the pleasure of their respective *tai-shus*, not the coordinator. You have come on a fool’s errand.”

“If you truly believed that, we’d be dead already.”

“Do not overestimate your importance.” Kamikuro’s voice was no harder than before, but there was no mistaking the lick of menace just beneath. “Tell me, McCain, just what does your esteemed *tai-sho* offer *us*?”

“Your honor.”

Kamikuro laughed outright. “That and a stone will buy a cup of coffee.”

McCain pushed on. “*Tai-sho* Tormark hasn’t forgotten the service the Ghost Regiments rendered to the coordinator in times past. Besides, your support for *Tai-shu* Sakamoto is conspicuous by its lack.”

Kamikuro dismissed the comment with a negligent wave of his hand. “A circumstance easily explained if we have nothing to give.”

“But not believable.” Then, at the sudden flood of color in Kamikuro’s face, McCain said, “Forgive me, Kamikuro-san, but I think you have many resources you choose not to share because your allegiance is, ultimately, to the coordinator, not Sakamoto. Katana Tormark acts out of honor and duty to Vincent

Kurita.”

“Really? I’ve heard nothing from *him* .” Dark blossoms of color stained the old man’s cheeks, and emotion thinned his voice. “Why should I fly to the aid of a woman who sanctions murder? Did your *tai-sho order* you to target members of my family and the families of my people?”

“I ordered nothing, *Kamikuro-san*,” said McCain, grateful that, technically, this was true. Drexel had arranged for all that. He just hoped *Kamikuro* wouldn’t ask *her* .

The old man’s hard gray eyes clicked from McCain to Drexel and then back again. Then, after a long moment, he turned to Ito, who stood behind and to the *oyabun* ’s right. Something wordless passed between the two, and then Ito rapped an order in Japanese at the bodyguards, who bowed and left. *Kamikuro* waited until the door had clicked shut. Then he folded his arms upon his desk and gave McCain a frankly appraising look. “As it happens, I’ve been pondering a request for many days and still cannot decide what to do except . . . here you are, and here is Ms. Drexel, and so perhaps fate and circumstance have pointed the way. Last week, I was contacted by *akurumako* , a go-between. His message was simple: that I should go to the aid of my brother *oyabun* on *Kitalpha* in circumventing an act that can only bring dishonor.”

McCain and Drexel spared one another a brief, mystified glance. “I don’t understand,” said McCain. “You have a brother?”

“Not in the flesh,” said *Kamikuro*, then tapped a finger against his chain-link tattoo. “In spirit. His name is *Kobayashi*, and it seems that *Tai-shu Sakamoto* has not forgotten *weyakuza* either. But *Kobayashi* believes that *Katana Tormark* acts with honor and that *Sakamoto* does not.” *Kamikuro* made a sour face. “I will be frank. We have enough headaches on *Junction* to keep us occupied for quite some time. But there is this”—again the finger tapping that tattoo—“our brand, you might say, and now here you are, and the decision is thrust upon me. Serve you, or *Sakamoto*? Eh? What do you think, McCain?”

“I’m a doctor, *Kamikuro-sama*, not a politician. But I’m sworn to the side of a woman of honor just as *Ryuu-gumi* stands for the people. You have to do what your honor demands.”

“Even if you must die?”

“I enjoy living,” McCain said, without irony, “so I’d really rather not.”

Kamikuro regarded them both without expression for several long moments during which Ito stared, Drexel fidgeted, and McCain thought that if they were going to die after all, he’d ask for a last cigarette because, what the hell. Then *Kamikuro* said, “Well, as it happens, I might bring a bit more than just men.”

That seemed to be a signal because Ito came to life, bowed and left the room. *Kamikuro* still said nothing; the minutes passed; and McCain could hear the muted whistle of Drexel’s breathing. Then the door to the study opened again. First, one of the bodyguards, bearing what looked like a heavy metal chest, and then Ito reappeared, a teak tray in hand. A stone sake jug stood on the tray, along with three tiny ceramic cups, and at the sight, McCain’s heart rebounded with sudden hope.

Kamikuro rose, beckoning McCain and Drexel to a round wooden side table upon which Ito had set the teak tray. Taking up the stone jug, *Kamikuro* poured chilled sake into each of the three ceramic cups. He did this with his right hand, and he was very careful to make sure that each cup held the same as its fellows, no more and no less. Then, *Kamikuro* offered a cup each to McCain and Drexel before taking

the final one himself. "Drink with me," he said.

The sake was of good vintage, and McCain's nose tingled with the heady, sharp aroma of strong liquor. He dearly wanted to pound down a couple of belts but forced himself to take first one sip, then two, and then three, draining the cup. Eyeing him over the rim of his own cup, Kamikuro nodded as if in satisfaction. He replaced his cup on the tray, and then he began flipping a series of metal catches studded along one side of the chest. "We will save our second drink for a bit later," he said, as he worked the catches one by one. "This is very old, but it works. We have others, but very few, for some have been lost to time. While we might have made use of them ourselves or manufactured more, our charge has been to guard them, with the instruction that they are only to be used by the right person at the right time." Folding back the lid, Kamikuro reached in and withdrew a heavy black box and placed it almost reverently upon the table as Ito removed the chest. "I believe Katana Tormark is the right person, McCain, and the time is now."

McCain stared at the object, which he saw now was not a simple box, but a device: all black metal stippled with dials and switches. "What is it?"

"A communications device that allows for contact between planets without an HPG. Theodore Kurita called them black boxes."

Drexel gave a muffled gasp. Kamikuro spared her a glance, and when his gaze returned to McCain, he saw a mischievous twinkle in the old man's eyes. "*Chu-sa*McCain, do you think that Katana Tormark might put them to good use?"

But before McCain could recover himself enough to answer, Kamikuro had already refilled their cups and raised his in a toast. Then Kamikuro said, very seriously, "Regrettably, I do think it would be best for all concerned if you were quite, *quite* dead."



Pirate Jump Point, Proserpina Space

Prefecture III, Republic of the Sphere

10 May 3135

Marcus had flayed the muscles of his upper body, stopping only after two hours left his arms screaming. Then Marcus had ordered lights off in his gym, and now, weightless, he stared into space, literally. He palmed sweat from his cheek, gathering the salty water into a shimmering globule that undulated like something living. He turned his hand this way and that, fascinated as always that the globule simply hung there.

Marcus had big hands, larger now with exercise, though they'd always been powerful; so strong, in fact, that he remembered the first time he'd killed a man by snapping his neck. That quick twist and jerk, the small bones crackling as if he'd popped his knuckles. They were hands that had never known the intimate hollows and valleys of a woman but were, nonetheless, useful hands. Killing hands.

A stray thought levered into consciousness, unbidden: If necessary, could they kill Jonathan?

He was surprised that he wasn't upset, and he gave more thought *to that* than the idea itself. The question wasn't whether he should kill Jonathan. They were brothers; Marcus needed him to carry out their plans, no question about it. Despite Jonathan's flair for the dramatic, things were going precisely as they'd hoped. Only Ramadeep Bhatia knew, or suspected, that Kappa, the Little Luthien Killer, and Subhash Indrahari's Son of the Dragon were one and the same. Doubtless, Bhatia believed he had a cunning weapon in his own ISF double agent who operated under the cloak of the *Keeper*'s O5P while masquerading as one of *Dragon Fury*'s O5P contingent.

Yet neither Bhatia nor Emi Kurita suspected that the go-between *both* had employed not only fed misinformation *to both* camps, but knew what both were plotting because the man they'd never met but both employed was—Jonathan.

So, Bhatia's best-laid plans were for naught. For example, that ISF agent he'd sent to masquerade as a tamago vendor and sanction McCain was certainly dead by now; truly, a bad egg. Jonathan's warning Drexel ahead of time not only reassured her that her source was unimpeachable but virtually guaranteed that *Dragon Fury*'s O5P would use him again.

Sleights of hand and feats of magic: Jonathan was talented enough to play any role. Oh, Marcus was *important*; money and what it bought—discreet pilots, tight-lipped couriers, a cadre of JumpShips—were essential. But, without Jonathan, Marcus was nothing more than a very wealthy, very bitter man.

Because here was Jonathan's masterstroke: murdering the Bounty Hunter and assuming his identity, then using that identity to muddy the waters. Infiltrating Katana Tormark's camp, warning her of turncoats in her organization, while turning around and tipping off the ISF agent Bhatia had inserted into her O5P *himself*. Yes, it *was* brilliant because little Katana would work herself into knots, wondering who the traitor was.

Marcus' mouth tugged into a reluctant grimace—part smile, part frown. Yamata might've been a better code-name than Kappa. Yamata was a vengeful god, a serpent with eight heads and as many faces. As was Jonathan: Son of the Dragon, ISF, O5P, or Bounty Hunter, but always a step ahead, weaving his serpentine path, playing faction against faction and leaving each to wonder.

So Marcus should be happy, *ecstatic*. They had money, and Jonathan had the means, and their goal was in sight. Bringing down the proud Kuritas would be their revenge against the House that had taken away their honor; against their *father*, by using the training he'd given them to destroy his heritage. And the killing blow for Katana Tormark, the symbol of everything they'd lost.

My legs. Our father. And our poor mother. Oh, I want Katana to suffer, so much she'll beg for death, and be grateful when it comes. That data crystal I shall listen to and savor for the rest of my life. But if I have to do something about Jonathan . . .

And there Marcus' mind stuttered, tripping the way a faulty holovid recycled an image in an endless loop. Finally, a stab of pain that was not in his heart brought him back, and Marcus saw his hand clenched in a tight fist, his nails digging into his palms.

I can't think of this now. Marcus relaxed, his strong fingers unfurling like the petals of an exotic flower. The shimmering globe of his sweat had shattered into spheres no bigger than a pinprick. Tiny balloons of bright red blood clung to his torn flesh.

Tomorrow, I'll think about this tomorrow; or maybe in a month, or maybe two. But not now, I

don't have to think about it now.

He flicked his hand, and now his blood was free, rising to mingle with his sweat and drift in a lazy synchrony: the shattered heart of a fractured star.

Conqueror's Pride, Proserpina

Prefecture III, Republic of the Sphere

10 May 3135

“Something’s got to be done about that Kat, you mark what I’m saying.” Sully clattered pans together with far more noise than necessary. Three assistants stood in a far corner and quailed. “Her going off half-cocked, no one knows where, and me sitting here, thumb up me arse, and not even so much as a by-your-leave.”

“Cut that infernal racket!” Jake squinted at Sully, his wrinkled visage framed in a scented cloud that smelled of buttery leeks and savory barley. “Land’s sake, yer as twitchy as a long-tailed cat in a roomful of rockers. Man can’t hear himself *think*, much less work; all this commotion and you like to pee your britches.”

Sully began to splutter, but the old man cut him dead with a glare. “None of your lip, you hear?” Jake took aim with a long, wooden spoon. “I ain’t your pappy and don’t cotton none to the job, but you ain’t too old a good tanning wouldn’t set you right as rain. Now, go on.” He punctuated this last by giving the air a vicious jab with his spoon. “Git outta here, take a walk, git yerself laid if you gotta, but you cool down, and don’t come back less’n you aim to behave.”

Astonishment choked Sully’s face red as a beet, and the big man’s hands bunched. For a split second, the only sound was the bubble of soup. Then Sully sagged, almost visibly deflated. “All right.” Sully jerked his apron from his neck. “I s’pect you’re right. But I’ll be back to start . . .”

But Jake was already shaking his head. “You got the rest of the afternoon and night off. They’s three of them.” A jab with the spoon at the assistants. “And that’s already three too many. I don’t want to see yer mug agin till tomorrow breakfast.”

Sully didn’t like it, but he did as he was told. Later on, the scene would pass into apocrypha, a story that proved there really had been no one quite like Jake at bringing Sully to heel—and that fact alone should’ve given them pause.

Lunch passed without a hitch. Crockery cleaned and stowed, pots washed and drying on a rack, the kitchen eased into an afternoon lull that habitually went from two to five when dinner preparations began. The assistants napped.

But Jake did not. Instead, wicker basket hooked over an arm, he ambled to town. The last anyone saw of Jake was his back.

After half a klick of climbing a steady rise toward town, Jake stopped, turned, glanced back the way he’d come. The university campus that housed Katana’s headquarters was out of sight; any sentries couldn’t see him either.

It had taken Jake more than forty minutes to make his way out but less than twenty to backtrack

because, for one thing, he ran. He circled into the compound via a twisting, boggy route knitted through a swamp. Access through the swamp was poorly defended because the planet provided its own sentries: blood limpets, shells gaping and patiently waiting in the black ooze for the unwary. The limpets' preferred food was Proserpina's dragon iguana; however, more than a few of Proserpina's early settlers had ended up as between-meal snacks. Jake was not, however, one of them.

In twenty-five minutes, Jake was padding on cat's feet down a hall in Katana's private wing. With Katana off-planet, the vaunted Amaterasu security was a little lax. Jake found the conference room with no problem. After all, he'd been there before, delivering food for the Fury's field commanders—and once even before then. Slipping into the room, Jake cut a beeline for the dragon tapestry. He tweezed a minute transceiver from the center of the dragon's glittering eye. The tiny listening device had performed very, very well.

Once back in the kitchen, he glanced at a wall-mounted chronometer. It was half past three, more than enough time. The kitchens were arranged in a series of interlocking squares, each connected by a short hallway. The last room housed the headquarters' stores: seven rows of metal shelves running ten meters long and crammed with flour, rice, sugar and dry goods; two walk-in refrigerated lockers (one for vegetables and the other for meat and fish); a walk-in freezer. Jake headed for the last row of shelves. At the very back, in a corner, stood a wide-mouthed oak barrel filled to the brim with brine and dill pickles. Jake squatted, patted behind the barrel, and brought out a knapsack.

Then, tugging the bag open, he reached one hand behind his neck, pulled . . . and peeled off his face. The mask gave grudgingly, with the same kind of sucking sound a boot makes in thick mud. Once free of his face and hair, he reached up with an index finger and popped out his right eye.

Then, something rustled. Something very big moved, then banged into something else and cursed.

Jake froze instantly, blue contact in one hand, his face and scalp in the other, muscles coiled tight as a spring—as Sully James, red-eyed and reeking of juniper, stumbled into view.

Sully hadn't gone to town. He hadn't gone to his room. Instead, he'd taken refuge in his favorite thinking spot; a sack of potatoes, behind which he kept a private stash of fine gin, guaranteed to put hair on one's teeth. Sully had one paw wrapped around the neck of his bottle, the other up in greeting, and a hearty grin on his face that dribbled away as he gawked at Jake, whose face hung in one hand.

"Here now . . . now, wush . . . wush?" The words came out mushy, not only because Sully's tongue wouldn't cooperate but because Jake was staring: one eye blue, the other a naked, steely gray.

"Wush . . . wush *thehell* . . . ?"

Tucking his face into a back pocket, Jake sighed. "Oh, Sully," he said, shaking his head and ambling up to the bigger man, who still stood wreathed in gin fumes. "You know, I really wish you'd gone to town."

Quick as lightning, Jake's right hand flashed out, his fingers rigid as spikes. They speared Sully at the hump of the big man's Adam's apple, and there was an audible crackle as the cartilage of Sully's larynx fractured.

Sully's hands flew for his throat; the gin bottle exploded against the floor, the fumes so strong they made Jake's eyes water. Choking, Sully staggered back, banged against a shelf and then collapsed in a hail of tin cans. He writhed, big feet running a path to nowhere, mouth open and gaping the way a fish does when it suffocates on a dock.

Jake stood over Sully for an instant, then dropped to his haunches. “Go to sleep, Sully,” he said, then palmed the back of the big man’s head in his left hand and grabbed the angle of Sully’s jaw with his right. He gave Sully’s head and neck a quick twist. There was a crackle like egg shells crushed underfoot, and Sully went limp.

It was over and done in less than fifteen seconds, but Jake lingered a few seconds more. He’d made Sully’s end as painless as possible, yet there was a little piece of him—so tiny that its voice was reed-thin—that felt a queer pang of remorse. “*I am* sorry,” he said, and thought that maybe, wherever Sully was, Sully knew.

A tinny buzz from his finger watch, and Jake saw he had an hour left before the first of the assistants arrived to prepare the evening meal. Working quickly, he keyed in the combination to the meat locker, palmed it open. The locker sighed open; a ball of chilled air that smelled vaguely of blood and fresh fat rolled out. There were two long rows of meat—sides of beef and pork—hanging in opaque plastic bags. Hooking his hands in the big man’s armpits, Jake heaved back on his heels. Sully’s body hesitated, then hissed over the storeroom floor, trailing a slick of gin. Sully’s eyes were still open but turning glassy, and his tongue lolled at the corner of his mouth. His neck was folded nearly in two, Sully’s ear touching his right shoulder.

It took Jake ten minutes to truss Sully’s arms and legs to his beefy torso; another five to jockey him into position, lay him on an empty plastic bag and skewer his flesh at the hollow of Sully’s clavicle with a meat hook. The hook was thick as Sully’s wrist and solid steel; Jake was sweating by the time he’d forced the hook through skin, bone and meat. A rivulet of blood dribbled slowly from the puncture wounds, but Jake knew that without a heart to pump, the oozing would let up soon and cork the holes with purple-jellied clots.

Then Jake zipped up the bag, attached the hook to a vacant eye on a rail of sides of beef and hoisted Sully’s body until the bag was even with its fellows. He surveyed his work with a critical eye, then nodded. It would take them time to miss Sully, even longer to find him because . . . Jake pried open the magnetic combination pad and eased out its memory chip. Then he swung the heavy door to and grinned as the lock clicked. There. Now they’d have to use a laser torch, and even then they might not find the body for days because refrigeration would cut down on the stink, and by the time Sully’s body bloated with rot, Jake would be long gone.

And in fact—Jonathan popped out his other eye—Jake was gone already.

A few hours later, safely ensconced in his brother’s private DropShip and hurtling toward the pirate jump point, Jonathan had time to think.

First off, his relationship with Fusilli had netted unimaginable rewards. Bhatia had been correct in bringing Fusilli under his wing; the young man was quite reliable and a font of knowledge. After all, what was a little invasion plan between fellow double agents, especially when Jonathan knew all the right passwords and Fusilli’d never laid eyes on him? If Fusilli was right—and he usually was—Sakamoto’s first wave would have overwhelmed the border worlds. By now, Shimonita, the most distant, ought to be sewn up; Albalii, Piedmont, Chichibu all gone days before, Republic forces trampled and their resources scavenged. The force from Kurhah would have deployed in two fronts, one to Shinonoi and the other, more massive front, hurtling for Halstead Station, where The Republic’s forces, squaring off with Sadachbia right across the border, would be most heavily fortified. And then the second wave would begin, but that’s where things got, in Jake-speak, about as reliable as a one-eyed dog in a meat locker.

And where was Sakamoto? Thinking, Jonathan sucked on his lower teeth. Yes, the good warlord might just want to be in on the fight for Biham, but the same could be said of Ancha. Ancha was a good place to start, anyway, with or without Sakamoto. *Because Crawford's there, yes, and the disconsolate little Chinn, too.*

Sighing, Jonathan allowed his body to sag into a plush custom-made acceleration couch—another luxury Marcus' money bought—and nearly groaned with pleasure as the automatic sensors set to work kneading his sore muscles. *Ancha, it is .*

As he drifted into sleep, Jonathan's last thought was that Andre Crawford would be very happy to see him—would, indeed, be waking up to an unpleasant fact any day now. And if Crawford wasn't quite awake just yet? Well—Jonathan's lips curled in a dreamy smile—that would happen, and very soon.

Red Sands, Devil's Lot, Klathandu IV

Benjamin Military District, Draconis Combine

29 May 3135

Another gust of wind sandblasted his stinging cheeks, and *Tai-i* Sagi figured another couple of days of these godforsaken sandstorms and he'd never have to worry about shaving again. He screwed a pair of digital binoculars to his goggles. Not that there was anything to see. He'd said so to the radar tech. Said the tech must have sand for brains. Oh, yeah, sure, they'd seen what *looked* like a JumpShip flicker in at the nadir jump point—but that was six days ago. Count 'em, *days .Six .*

Sagi let the binoculars fall to his chest, the neck strap trying to tug free, jouncing and bouncing in the wind. Here he was, virtually marooned in the armpit of the Inner Sphere, him and his trusty band of Unproductives. Okay, correction, his infantry and some equally miserable flyboys . . . not that he gave a shit one way or the other. When the HPGs went on the fritz, the first thought through Sagi's mind was, *Yeah, baby, bring it on, I wanna kill me a mess of Blues. Butnoooo .* He was bait. *Bait!* What a laugh. *By the time those eggheads in strategic command decide this Katana character's not gonna bite, the fracking war will be over, and all I'll get is a skin peel.*

The sand was only *one* problem. The company, another. Sagi threw a narrow look at the *shujin* standing to his right. The master sergeant was a head shorter and compact, with a well-muscled torso; a sliver of tattoo was just visible below the soldier's right cuff.

"This . . . is . . . pointless!" Sagi had to scream even to hear himself.

The wind snatched away the *shujin*'s reply. "What?" Sagi cupped a hand to his ear. "*What?*"

"I said, anyone brave enough to come, unannounced, is likely to regard this storm as a golden opportunity. It hides their approach, and we cannot launch an intercept."

Sagi was about to point out that, yeah, *maybeyakuza* did numb-nuts things like fly blind in a sandstorm, but *he* was damned tired waiting around for *something* to happen . . . and then *something* did.

At first, he wasn't sure if what he'd heard was just the cry of a fresh gale, a high, grating whine that reminded Sagi of those pneumatic drills dentists used. Then, out of the coppery murk, the ghostly outlines of a fighter coalesced; a *Lucifer*, its thrusters spurting controlled bursts that bathed the sand clouds orange. Blown to a near standstill, the *Lucifer* seemed to hang above the sand a brief second and then the craft touched down with a decrescendo engine-whine. Sagi glimpsed a hazy emblem just below the cockpit: a near-copy of the Kurita dragon, but with four diamonds—three black, and one white.

Holy crap. Sagi was stunned. The *Lucifer*'s canopy levered up like the top half of a clamshell, and through his binoculars Sagi picked out two figures clambering onto the smaller wing to port. *Must be redesigned to hold two, or one of them made like an accordion; Lucifers only hold one guy.* Wind tugged their clothing. The lead figure—the pilot, Sagi assumed—resolved into the contours of a woman. Tall and willowy, she had a determined set to her stride, and now Sagi saw that she also sported the twin swords of the samurai: not in the manner of a low-ranking *bushi*, but behind and to the side. The second figure, following two steps behind, moved with the great deliberateness of age. Both wore a hooded, ceremonial *kariginus*, though the woman's had been modified to a more traditional cloak, clasped at the throat and open to allow her access to her weapons.

The two came to a halt a meter shy of Sagi and the *shujin*. Neither party said anything. Then, twitching her hood back, the woman reached behind and withdrew her katana with her right hand, using her index finger to secure the guard—a sign of trust. She held the sheathed weapon out in both hands, edge pointing toward her as custom dictated: a signal that she meant no harm.

“Good day, *Tai-i*,” she said, and even with a storm raging all around, Sagi heard each and every strong, steady word. “I am Katana Tormark, and this is my esteemed companion. Either we are your guests, or your prisoners. The next move is yours.”

On the outskirts of Siang, Hoshina, Biham

Prefecture II, Republic of the Sphere

30 May 3135

They would attack from the west and take advantage of the setting sun; a small advantage to be sure but, considering the circumstances, Sir Reginald Eriksson would take whatever he could get and Fortune allowed. But as he guided his *Orion* into battle, he saw that the air ahead was already fading from azure blue to pewter gray as a late spring storm blew in from the east and ate up the sky.

Eriksson's booted feet nudged his *Orion*'s bulk into a steady march upon a rock-strewn slope. The incline was forty-five degrees; his *Orion*, a centuries' old relic that'd survived the Jihad, canted forward at its pelvis, lumbering over rock and scree with the dogged determination of a very weary man carrying a very heavy pack. Eriksson was hot and uncomfortable despite the fact that he'd stripped down to a simple cooling vest and skivvies. His old man's bones felt each and every step of the old 'Mech as seventy-five tons of titanium steel ground rock and earth and sent up gray-white puffs of dust, like smoke. The *Orion*'s external mikes picked up the squealing groans and pops of small boulders exploding under the 'Mech's weight. And it had been a long time, decades perhaps, since he'd donned a neurohelmet; the helmet chafed the tender skin of his neck and shoulders.

His lancemates were a sorry lot, a hastily refitted ConstructionMech and two MiningMechs. The hornet yellow ConstructionMech was the heaviest, weighing in at thirty-five tons, and had been outfitted with an autocannon jury-rigged to replace a right titanium claw used for levering blocky concrete into place. The two MiningMechs were much smaller, only twenty tons apiece, and each had a flamer spot-welded to the right arm. Their pilots were brave men—boys, really; none had seen a real battle, and Eriksson's own memories of his struggles with smugglers were dim with time.

In fifteen minutes, Eriksson's *Orion* topped the rise, his fellows pulling up to his right and left. The clouds were closer now, and so heavy that their bellies seemed to graze the earth. A jag of lightning cut a flaming seam in the sky and burned purple afterimages that Eriksson saw when he blinked. But he picked out the DropShip, a bulbous ball that reminded Eriksson of a mushroom, the kind he squeezed to release a cloud of spores. But *this* particular mushroom was spitting cold blue bolts of PPC fire at two lances of Republic aerospace fighters that bobbed and weaved in the sky over the DropShip like gnats. The air was alive with the stuttering ruby lash of their lasers scorching over Drac infantry and hover tanks released by the DropShip. The scream of missiles and the shrieks of the dying and wounded reverberated through his cockpit, and he toggled off his external mikes with a hand that trembled. A column of black, oily smoke boiled from the gutted skeleton of a Demon medium tank—and all the while the sky flared with lightning and thunder boomed across the valley in a wall of sound he heard even though his *Orion* was, technically, deaf.

Lightning sparked again, much closer this time because the roll of thunder billowing out of the sky was almost immediate. There was a brief, trembling pause as if the world was holding its breath.

Eriksson brought his targeting systems on line as the first hard drops of rain shattered against his ferroglass canopy with a sound like the rapid fire of a rifle. Then he gave the command: "Attack."

And it was as if the heavens had been waiting, too, because as Eriksson pushed his *Orion* into a lumbering run that he felt in every bone, the storm broke. But he had one comfort at least. The engine of his death would not be Katana Tormark.

Dartmoor Valley, Normandy, Ancha

Prefecture III, Republic of the Sphere

2 June 3135

Question: How do you kill a whole passel of 'Mechs?

Answer: Very carefully.

Sho-sa William "Buck" Bruckner had ordered his tanks to get the hell out of Dodge just as soon as they'd churned the peaty swamp that made up the floor of Dartmoor Valley into a lumpy quagmire of black ooze. At intervals, rough-hewn granite boulders jutted out of the tarry sludge, and the air was saturated with the rotted, slightly yeasty and fermented reek of fen vegetation slowly turning to goo. The peat steamed as methane vapors, warmed by putrefaction, hung over the bog in a white, misty veil, and the smell reminded Buck of a cow barn: fetid, warm and ripe.

Buck's tank company—a DI Schmitt and two Arrow IVs, yeah, some company—was positioned to either side of him on the ridge above, with the Schmitt a quarter klick further on since its range was longer, and Buck was hoping, *praying* he got a chance to lob some of those armor-piercing missiles

where they'd do the most good. Either that, or wait to get stomped into gopher guts.

Buck's mission was simple enough: buy time. Borrow it, steal it if he had to, but his tanks and people had to square enough time for Crawford and the others to make it to Normandy Beach, where there was a DropShip Crawford had ordered away from their base after their fighters got blown into subatomic particles. It wasn't that Crawford was a coward; it was one of those live-to-fight-another-day kind of things. Problem was the DropShip was, oh, still thirty-plus klicks away due west, and it was gonna leave them behind if they couldn't catch up, so Buck figured he'd punched one of those one-way tickets.

Balancing one ooze-slicked boot on a notch worn into a massive granite boulder as big around as three men and two meters tall, Buck snuck a peek around the rock through a pair of digital binoculars. They werestill coming: three Draconis Combine BattleMechs almost close enough to touch—a*Catapult* that, despite its twelve-meter height, resembled a hunchback; a blocky*Pack Hunter*; and the leader of the bunch, a towering, heavy 'Mech with a flashing scimitarlike katana married to its right hand and an autocannon slung beneath its left arm. A scarlet banner emblazoned with the black Kurita dragon was attached to a right-angled staff that appeared to be connected to the 'Mech between its "shoulder blades."

That is one big honking 'Mech. Buck screwed up his face in a frown, then let loose a gob of blacker'n tar spit before tonguing his wad from his left lower lip to his right and settling into some serious chewing. He didn't have the slightest idea what the 'Mech was; hadn't ever seen it before. Clearly, Kuritan. That banner reminded Buck of ancient stories from Terra about armies bearing their flags and colors into battle. The 'Mech bore a slight resemblance to the*No-Dachi* but, whereas the older-style 'Mech sported two SRM racks, a medium laser and a PPC, this BattleMech only had the single PPC.*Because he's one confident son of a gun, that's for sure.* Buck wore his regulation tanker's uniform—nut-tan jumpsuit, brown boots, thick nutmeg-brown jerkin outfitted with cooling coils, matching gloves. Instead of a helmet, he'd clapped on his prized, bark-colored ten-gallon Stetson, sweat stain ringing the brim, and now he reached up to give his right ear a good, hard scratch.*That boy's built for in-your-face, up close and personal.* That's how confident the Kuritans were.

Probably they had a right to be. Compared to those 'Mechs, his guys were like a bunch of villagers with pitchforks and clubs going after some fire-breathing lizard as big as a skyscraper. Buck's eyes rolled over a straggly line of Brotherhood troops, a platoon strong, taking cover behind the sheltering ridge created by granite outcroppings. The men weren't talking. Their faces were tight, the skin tented down with tension until their bones showed. If they lived through this cockamamie plan, Buck was gonna put them all up for medals.

He'd tucked two mortar squads, each with a quartet of portable, armor-piercing SRM launchers, behind rocks in the bowl of the valley at ten and four o'clock. No suicide mission; he'd made the men be especially careful to leave a narrow swath of green and rock to use for getting their asses out when the time came. But he needed those launchers in the valley. Besides the tanks, these squads were Buck's heavy hitters. The rest of their arms was piddly stuff: a ragtag collection of pulse lasers, slug throwers, laser rifles and one bonus—three Thunderstruck Gauss rifles.

From a distance, the quagmires looked like mud, easily crossed. Only someone brought up on Ancha would recognize that the peaty bogs, once disturbed, went down for a good half klick and were as deadly as quicksand. This particular bog extended for five klicks in every direction except here at this choke point, and Buck was counting on . . . well, he was counting on arrogance and plain old dumb luck.

Buck raised his binoculars again. The 'Mechs jumped into focus. His digital readout told him that in about five minutes, well, things were going to get pretty busy. Squirted black juice, Buck hauled off his

Stetson, armed away sweat, then slammed that hat back into place. "Boys? Time to bag us some 'Mechs."

Question: How does a BattleMech make short work of renegade traitors?

Answer: Easily.

On the other hand, the guy with that crazy hat . . . well, he was a little different. Perched high in the cockpit of his shiny, seventy-five ton *Rokurokubi*, Fourth Sword of Light *Chu-sa* Terry Merrick searched the terrain dead ahead. Absently, he gave the back of his neck a good scratch, grateful that he had one of the newer, lighter neurohelmets that perched upon rather than encased his head. He and his lance were two clicks away from the ridge, and Merrick saw at once that the hat guy's plan showed a flash of brilliance. The valley was a rough bowl, about five clicks wide and long. A fine web of mist hung over the churned earth like the interlacing weave of a cobweb: simple matter to wade across. The only thing that looked remotely daunting was the lip of a steeply canted cliff dead ahead. Tongues of gray-and-white scree on the cliff face licked rocks heaped at the base of the ridge. He saw that the rocks were rotten, granite mixed with crumbly limestone and calcite.

His helmet buzzed, and the *Catapult*'s pilot said, "Merrick-san, I'm picking up body heat behind those rocks up there. *Kasu*. Scum might as well take out an ad."

"Probably waiting for us to make a move." This from the *Pack Hunter*. "*Chu-sa*, may I suggest we fan out instead of trying the cliff directly?"

"*Hai*, my thoughts, exactly," said Merrick. "We'll wade into the valley about a half click. That way, we're still out of range of those tanks and that Schmitt."

"Nothing to worry about." The *Catapult*'s pilot laughed. "Give me a clear shot, Merrick-san, and that *Kono yaro*? History."

"I'll hold you to that," Merrick said, but with less enthusiasm than he should've felt. Thing was, he didn't mind blowing a couple hundred Blues to kingdom come, and he was proud of his 'Mech, knew that his ten-meter-long katana inspired real fear. The entire design was deliberately and carefully constructed to resemble a samurai's helmet and armor, and that was as it should be because Merrick was of the Sword of Light, a member of the Combine's most elite units.

Yet, was there honor here? There'd been talk about Sakamoto ordering attacks on civilian targets as if the Ares Conventions hadn't existed for hundreds of year. Only bullies murdered civilians, and they were warriors. There was no honor in killing defenseless civilians. *Or shooting at forces that clearly had orders to pull their punches*. The Fury had dealt them half-hearted blows in stylized combat, signaling their disinclination to fight their spiritual brethren. *And we answered with killing blows, and there is no honor there, either*.

Irritated, Merrick shook his head. What was he thinking? *I exist to serve; honor demands obedience and my duty is to fight*. Whatever his personal thoughts, one thing was certain. Now, the Fury would kill them if they could. So, morality later. Whatever Merrick thought of Sakamoto's tactics would have to wait. They had an enemy to engage, and the battle should be short. And what were a few dozen infantry and creaking treads against the Sword of Light?

“*Temae!*” said Merrick, and grinned as his mouth filled with the familiar and welcome tang of adrenaline that surged through his veins. “Let’s fight.”

Buck watched as the ’Mechs waded into the bog, that katana-wielding fella first, and his heart banged against his chest like to bust. The ground immediately around and before the ’Mechs was just solid enough to reassure them, and Buck knew they wouldn’t hit the bad stuff for another several paces. He saw the ’Mechs’ plan immediately—the slower, heavier ’Mech led the charge into the valley, with the lighter *Catapult* and *Pack Hunter* right behind but peeling off right and left, respectively. And they’d have to watch that *Pack Hunter*; that baby had jump jets and the last thing they needed was a ’Mech screaming down their throats. The lead honcho, that katana guy, probably figured to take on whatever Buck’s boys could muster, keep them busy while the other two came in at their flanks and bound them up tight, like the pincer-grip of a lobster’s claw.

Yeah, good plan. Buck’s lips split in a grin. *But there’s plans, and then there’s plans . . .*

He saw it as soon as it happened; in fact, he *heard* it, the sucking, squelching sound of mud, and then that katana-’Mech’s right leg sank up to its knee, the ’Mech pitching the way Buck had seen happen with horses snagged on a trip wire. The ’Mech teetered like an axed tree, and the pilot tried backing up, with a grinding *rrrr-rrrr* sound that set Buck’s teeth on edge, same as a teacher scratching her nails over a chalkboard.

Buck keyed his mike. “Lock and load and let ’er rip!”

The bluff exploded.

Merrick registered something wrong a split second before his computer screamed an alarm. In his helmet came the echoes of alarms going off in the cockpits of the other ’Mechs, and mingled curses from the pilots, but by then Merrick’s *Rokurokubi* was mired up to its right knee, his internal temp had spiked, and then, when he jerked his eyes from his HUD indicators to his status screens, he knew he was in *big* trouble, and how.

“What . . . ?” Merrick yanked back on his primary throttle and powered up to backpedal. He heard the *rrrr-rrrr* of his gyro and the squall of metal grinding against metal, but he wasn’t moving; *frac* it all, he wasn’t moving . . . !

“*Chikushou!*” someone cursed—the *Catapult*? The *Pack Hunter*? Whoever it was sounded more pissed-off than anxious. “I’m not getting traction here.”

“Throttle back.” Equally vexed, Merrick wrestled with his throttle. What a nuisance, and no wonder the valley was barren of Fury troops. “There’s got to be firm ground somewhere, just throttle back and we’ll . . .” He trailed off as his mind raced through a new calculus: *No troops, and no firm ground, and I’m pretty heavy . . . no wonder those kono yarodidn’t hang around . . .*

He’d not turned off his external feed, and now Merrick’s ears pricked with the unmistakable *pock-pock-pock* of weapons’ fire, and then, just as he moved to slap the feed into silence, a whistling shriek as missiles—the *Schmitt*, *yeah, gotta be . . .*—arced in and boomed against his right chest. The sound nearly cracked his brain in two, and Merrick gasped as the explosion rocked its way into the pit of

his stomach, like a punch to the solar plexus. His 'Mech wobbled from its forward-thirty tilt, and Merrick's vision swam as the scenery skewed, slewed sideways and then he was looking at blue sky and the great yellow ball of Ancha's sun as he overcompensated, rearing back. Instinctively, he jammed down on the *Rokurokubi*'s left leg, straightening it ramrod stiff. The *Rokurokubi*'s seventy-five tons shifted, and then horror bloomed in Merrick's chest like a black rose, and he was cold and hot and dripping thick, oily sweat—because he was stuck fast now, boyo, no doubt about it, the legs of his 'Mech splayed in a gymnast's split.

Instantly, his temperature soared; his HUD was alive with winking indicators, pulsing like angry red fireflies; and his cockpit filled with the grinding of actuator assemblies in the *Rokurokubi*'s knees and ankles. Then he saw them: through a gray haze of weapons' fire, the Fury's men bobbing, weaving, darting, boiling along the bluff like termites in the rotted guts of an old log.

The *Catapult* was left and a little ahead and he saw that the machine was in trouble . . . no, no, not just trouble. Though its autocannon spit defiant uranium slugs at the bluff and that particular 'Mech was tons lighter than his, the *Catapult* was mired on its back-canted chicken legs nearly to its gyroscope housing.

Then Merrick saw puffs of smoke out of the corner of his left eye, and his eyes jerked left to right. . . . *Incoming!* "Look out!" Merrick yelled, and pivoted his torso right in a wild, desperate arc, simultaneously squeezing off a sizzling blue bolt of PPC fire to intercept. But he was too slow; the hissing tongues of missile fire licked empty space, and then there was a series of huge *ka-BOOMS* Merrick heard, even though his external mike was off, as the missiles scored hits to the *Catapult*'s right shoulder. The *Catapult* reeled—and then its twin racks of fifteen missiles ignited. First the right, and then a few milliseconds later the left, and Merrick blinked, the orange-yellow fireballs of exploding munitions searing his brain. The ground shook hard enough to send granite boulders crashing down the bluff. Merrick imagined the high wails of men hurtling to their deaths: some slow as they sank ever deeper into the creeping ring of ooze that sucked at their legs, their arms, and filled their lungs; and others quickly, as their bodies broke open like water balloons, spraying crimson founts of hot blood and ruptured flesh.

And then the concussive force of the multiple blasts slammed into Merrick's 'Mech. As the machine staggered left, Merrick jerked right, overcompensated, and then felt his 'Mech cant at a weird, absurd angle. He was falling, he was going to . . . !

No, no, nononononono! Merrick had just enough time to register the world turning on a slow, lazy axis, the sky sliding by to be replaced by a view of the cliff just ahead, and then the *Catapult*, its torso enveloped in a halo of roiling smoke and fire, and then the rush of black muck toward his face . . . Merrick screamed, and flexed his right arm, jamming the point of the *Rokurokubi*'s elbow into the quagmire. His cockpit hovered twenty meters above the bog, and the move bought him time, and that was all.

A muffled *WHUMP* and Merrick flinched as the *Catapult* blew apart at its core, like the collapsing heart of a dying sun. Gobbets of molten armor and endosteel rained in a fiery storm, and a piece of the *Catapult*—Merrick was never sure what—came rushing at Merrick's canopy, and he flinched, turning away. There was a *BANG!* The canopy didn't just crack, or break open like an egg; it imploded. Shards of ferroglass showered over Merrick, and he was helpless to avoid the glittering, jagged edges. He heard the hollow *bock-bock-bock* of ferroglass banging into his neurohelmet, and then he wished he'd had an older neurohelmet because the skin of his cheeks was flayed open, and he felt the hot spray of blood slick his neck. Glass punched his chest; his cooling vest burst, gray fluid spraying, turning a dirty, noxious slate as it mingled with Merrick's blood. He screamed as one shard, sharp as a knife and long as a spear, skewered his right shoulder, slicing through red, quivering meat and bone, and pinned him to his pilot's couch. Pain exploded in his chest, and he let out a long, wailing roar of agony.

The only reason he didn't die right then and there was because a man's heart is on the left. Simple as that.

Merrick's vision sparkled orange, went red and then black as a wave of nausea clogged his throat. Gagging, Merrick tried taking shallow breaths, praying that, God, please, please . . . But every breath was a fresh agony, and then it was harder to breathe, like trying to stuck air through a straw from thirty meters under and now he tasted something brackish and salty, something sludgy and thick pooling in the floor of his mouth, and he vomited out a spray of bright red blood.

Got the lung. Merrick labored to pull in air. *Lung's been hit, I can't breathe . . .* He tried not to panic, but he was drowning and suffocating at the same time; he could feel the blood boiling out of his mouth and going down his throat. . . .

You're going to die right here, right now, if you don't focus!

Okay, okay; he tried marshaling his addled thoughts, grappling for some mental handhold. His cockpit, yes, his cockpit was breached; the stench of the bog billowed in, mixing with the acrid tang of disintegrating armor and spent munitions. A goddamned piece of ferroglass tacked him to his couch like a note to corkboard. Sounds roared into his breached cockpit; the air was alive with the screams of men, the hollow *whump-whump-whump* of weapons' fire. Something very bright, very red cut seams in the air directly over his head, and then he heard fresh screams, caught the unmistakable oily smell of roast meat.

ThePack Hunter . His thoughts were sluggish, slow as molasses on a cold morning. Yes, the *Pack Hunter* was behind and to the right; it must be directing fire, lasers, at the ridge. But the machine hadn't moved to flank him so he knew that the *Pack Hunter* was stuck, too.

Then he heard voices. Somehow the Fury's men had a way to go in and out of the valley; soon they'd fall upon him, hacking him and his fallen 'Mech to shreds the way holovids always showed cavemen swarming over a fresh kill. He braced himself because, by God, he was a warrior and he'd fight until his last breath . . .

But the killing blows never came; the river of sound parted on either side and flowed past, and he realized then that the Fury had made a big mistake—because now, even though he was filled with so much pain he wasn't sure how he was still conscious, and even though every new breath was a fresh agony and he wasn't sure if he'd drown or suffocate first, he saw something else. Red and jittering, as intermittent as a visual stutter—for an instant, he thought he was blacking out for sure, but then he realized that, by some miracle, his targeting systems were still intact.

His katana blade was useless, its tip aiming for some spot high in the sky, but he still had the PPC married to his 'Mech's left arm, the one that was still free. This was his best and only weapon, but could he still move it? He sipped in air, gagged. Then, grimacing with pain, he inched the *Rokurokubi*'s left arm up a fraction, then another . . . just needed clearance, that was all, just one chance . . .

Something fizzled in his ear, and then he heard the *Pack Hunter*'s pilot: "Merrick-san! Merrick, if you hear me, go for the ridge with your PPC, go for the ridge, but low, aim low! Do you copy? Do you . . . ?"

Copy that. Woozy with pain and loss of blood, Merrick took aim—and fired.

Much, much later, when Merrick awoke drugged to the hilt and sprawled in a nest of intravenous lines,

with a tube stuck in his chest and another down his throat, he discovered three things. One was that the *Pack Hunter* hadn't sunk nearly as far as the *Rokurokubi*, and so had activated its jump jets at the precise instant that Merrick sent PPC bolts slamming into the bluff. The *Pack Hunter*'s jets didn't blow the 'Mech free, but they did boil the bog and the Fury's men in flashes of superheated plasma so hot that what the jump jets didn't broil, the steam did.

The second was that Merrick's PPC blasted a horizontal trench directly beneath the granite-strewn ridge, and the *Pack Hunter*, catching the movement of the *Rokurokubi*'s left arm, had let fly a full spread of its eight extended-range microlasers and single PPC at exactly the same moment. The energy weapons' fire cored into the bluff; the cliff buckled, blew apart; half came sheeting down in a slurry of stone and chunks of earth. An Arrow IV tank hurtled barrel-first into the quagmire; a river of bodies hit the bog; and as some men clutched at handholds, the *Pack Hunter*'s pilot fried them with lasers to smoking, black, twisted corpses.

And this third: as the Fury retreated toward the distant humps of the Bourges Mountains, the *Pack Hunter*'s pilot saw men running and others hanging on for dear life to a second Arrow—and a man perching atop a Schmitt, the unmistakable silhouette of a ten-gallon Stetson held high, yippee-kay-ay.

But that was all later. For the time being, Merrick did the only thing he could, given the circumstances. He fainted.

Bourges Mountains along the Dover Coast

3 June 3135

As the hours passed, the sun slanted toward the horizon, and Buck didn't show, Crawford knew they couldn't wait any longer. So, nerves jumping with anxiety, they descended a rock-strewn pass corkscrewing between jagged spires of black basalt. Then they waded into a meadow tangled with fronds of browning seagrass, bent nearly horizontal by a strong wind whistling in from the sea just beyond. Then Crawford saw a ribbon of cobalt edging the horizon and knew: They'd made it.

Their luck still had to hold. Just another hour, maybe two, and then he and what was left of his command would load into a DropShip that squatted on a gleaming ribbon of sand beach at the base of a bone-white cliff. They'd leave, take their chances that Sakamoto hadn't blown their remaining JumpShip to hell and back; and if he had, they'd take their chances out in space, because Crawford would be damned if he came back to Ancha and let his people be slaughtered.

I should never have ordered my men to hold their fire, never. His brain was gummy with fatigue; every step he pushed his battered, scarred *Black Knight*, he imagined that this, surely, would be the great machine's last. His body bounced and bumped in his command couch because his shock-dampening systems had been damaged. He felt every *bang* and *jolt* down deep in every joint, every bone, like an arthritic. His air-purification system was at half capacity and his cockpit was stuffy; what little clothing he wore—his skivvies, a cooling vest—rancid with sweat.

The Combine had caught him off guard, but he'd followed Katana's orders to the letter: keep it simple, take a couple of potshots, don't do any real damage. Only that strategy evaporated as a lance of Combine aerospace fighters and a lance of his men went head to head, and the Combine shot to kill.

After that . . . well, that they'd gotten away at all was dumb luck; that they'd come so far without a repeat performance was downright miraculous. Crawford's eyes crawled over the survivors of his tattered unit. Besides the four 'Mechs, he'd scraped together five ragged infantry squads. Those who

could, clung to the legs of the 'Mechs; their two people movers were crammed with wounded. He had three Bellona tanks, out of ammo, with two working lasers between the three—and that was it. Oh, yeah, Buck and his men, he couldn't forget them; but, of course, Buck was a day behind and probably dead.

He'd not heard boo from Magruder on Sadachbia. When his weekly message to her via JumpShip hadn't arrived, Magruder would've sent a reconnaissance mission to see what was going on. But she hadn't, so either Magruder was fighting for her life, or she was dead. Thinking about her got rage simmering in his gut, and there was one thought that pulsed behind his eyes, like a headache that just wouldn't go away: Fusilli had been wrong. Crawford didn't know what that meant. The most reliable of spies could be compromised, and false, misleading information planted. Sakamoto, or Bhatia perhaps, might have been tipped off, and Fusilli fed shit.

Buthow, when Fusilli was so sure; his sources checked out . . . it was all too tidy, too damn easy . . .

He wasn't aware he'd spoken aloud until a weary voice sounded in his helmet: "Stop, Andre. Let it go."

Chinn, bless her; she'd fought hard and well. "Thanks, Toni, but . . ."

"But what?"

"Nothing. I . . ." He broke off as another voice—male and downright cheery—said: "Crawford, come on in; the water's fine."

Crawford bit back a sniping reply. His eyes picked out the unmistakable brilliant emerald-green of the Bounty Hunter's *Marauder II* silhouetted against the far horizon, dead ahead. Crawford said, "Where the hell have you been?"

"You told me to make sure the coast was clear. I'll remind you that I don't have jump jets, and crawling down to the beach took time. Wouldn't do to come this far only to have to go back, right? Anyway, the ship's prepped and ready to go."

A half hour later, Crawford was looking down at their DropShip, squatting on the beach as foamy waves retreated into the sea. Measho's Kat was out of missiles, so Crawford ordered him, the wounded and the men on foot down the cliff first. The Bounty Hunter's Gauss rifle was nearly exhausted, but he still had his two PPCs and lasers. So he, Chinn and Crawford covered the convoy's rear. Every three seconds, or so it seemed to Crawford, he had Chinn and the Bounty Hunter run long-range scans (his were on the fritz) while he toggled up mag and seismic readings, looking for the telltale signs of troops he was sure would show up at the worst possible moment—when his people were on the path with no cover.

An hour into it, his mag readings jumped, and three seconds after that, Chinn sang out, "Incoming!"

"There!" The Bounty Hunter now, to his immediate left. "Ten, twelve and two, sixty true! Fighters!"

A surge of adrenaline kick-started Crawford's heart. *No, no, not now, not now!* The familiar red grid of his targeting system winked onto his HUD even as he was scouring the sky. There they were, big as life and a hundred times as deadly; five fighters, their contrails stitching through the blue sky like the weave of an exotic blanket.

Five. Crawford had to close his eyes a second. *Oh, my God.* How had they known where to find

them? Maybe not such a mystery; the sea was the only place left to run. His people were sitting ducks.

He pivoted his 'Mech, saw the Lilliputian figures of his troops jumping off and scrambling over the meadow like flushed quail, making for the path down to the beach—and safety. “Measho! Get my people into the DropShip! Go,go!”

And then he was turning, springing forward, Chinn and the Bounty Hunter on his heels and fanning out, dashing into open terrain to draw the fighters' fire. Overhead, the fighters—three *Sholagars* and two heavier, less maneuverable but deadly *Onis*—broke formation the way streamers from a sparkler track in multiple trajectories, rolling, banking, swerving, spiraling through the dome of the sky in a dance of death.

“No, you don't; oh, no, you *don't!*” Crawford's lips peeled from his teeth in a snarl as he fired his lasers, scoring the air with ruby-red destruction. It wasn't the kind of fight he did well or liked best; no way was he going to be able to punch or kick those fighters from the sky, but if they were going to die, he'd go out with a bang.

To his right and left, Chinn and the Bounty Hunter were angling off, their weapons blazing; and then Crawford caught the hum of lasers from behind him, the staccato fire of autocannon, saw flashes of tracer fire sputtering across the sky, and knew the DropShip was in the fight. He left his external mikes on, heard the scream of long-range missiles whirring overhead, and he let loose with both lasers. The fiery streams crossed in an intercept: a fireball pillowing in successive bursts as the lasers caught the missiles, burning them from the sky. Shrapnel whizzed in a starburst, arcing in all directions; Crawford felt the explosive thunder boom in waves along the ground, shimmying up his 'Mech, rattling the cage of his cockpit.

A fighter—the *Oni* that had launched the strike—broke right as the DropShip opened fire again. Autocannon slugs carved the left wing from the fighter's nose. The *Oni*'s remaining engine roared and the plane banked hard right and then twisted into an inverted spiral, somersaulting like an acrobat that's missed the high wire, angling for the ground, fiery nose first, plowing into a *Sholagar* immediately below. The fighters splintered; flaming debris showered down, igniting the meadow grass in a wide parabola, and Crawford watched in horror as the *Sholagar*'s fuselage, its cockpit trailing fire, bulleted for the beach.

“No!” he cried, spiraling left, snap-firing both extended-range large lasers at once. He missed . . . but then an arrow of blue energy unfurled like the tongue of a fiery snake—the Bounty Hunter, to Crawford's right. A PPC bolt slammed into the *Sholagar*; the saucer-shaped fuselage tumbled left and wide like a tiddlywink and burst, harmlessly, against the sea.

No time for thanks; there were too many fighters, and Crawford was running hot as it was. *Too many*. Crawford wasn't bothering with aim so much anymore as keeping a spray of laser fire arcing through the sky, varying his angle and trajectory so the fighters had to keep dodging. Two down, three to go—but they were still too many. Crawford's systems shot into the red. Through his external feed he heard something that chilled the blood in his veins; the dying shrieks of his men, trapped on the cliff.

Then fire cored into his 'Mech's damaged left leg: an *Oni* on an attack run. A slag of armor melted away, puddling onto the grassy meadow. The grass was tinderbox-dry, and in a flash, there was smoke and lapping flame as the fire spread. Crawford's 'Mech lurched; a warning alarm shrilled as the lower leg actuator balked, then froze. The cockpit temperatures soared, and his DI began to tick through the autosutdown. Cursing, Crawford flipped to manual, brought his weapons back online. *No matter what, no matter what* . . . Then something in the cockpit fizzled in a spurt of flaming sparkles that dazzled his eyes. Clots of smoke wove a gray miasma that bound his throat and stung his eyes—and then he had an idea.

“Chinn, Hunter! Angle off, angle off!” Then, as the two BattleMechs sprinted right and left, Crawford flipped his flamer to high and scoured the grass as far as he could in a wide, guttering arc. There was a dry crackling sound like the crinkle of cellophane as the grass ignited. The wind coming from the sea did the rest, snatching pillars of churning black-and-gray smoke and sending them boiling into the sky as the grasses caught, spewing fire and ash. A *Sholagar* that had been close behind the *Oni* on a strafing run punched through a black wall of smoke, and the Bounty Hunter hammered the fighter with a burst of Gauss rifle fire that was so close it made Crawford’s ears ring.

Just two fighters left now: an *Oni* and a *Sholagar*. But Crawford had lost visual as the sky disappeared behind a pall of smoke. All the fighters had to do was arc up and then come in from the sea, but it bought them a few more precious seconds.

Then he heard Chinn’s sobbing breath in his ear: “Andre, I’m down to my last rack; my temperature’s molten, and I’ve lost my left large laser. We’ve got to get down . . . now.”

“I know. Measho, what’s your status?”

Measho’s reply fuzzed with static. “Nearly there . . . you’ve . . . down . . . now!”

“On my way!” shouted Crawford, but he knew he was lying. *I can hold them off, let Chinn and the Hunter . . .* But then it was as if some fickle god wasn’t quite done, because the wind changed direction for an instant, nudged aside the dark, obscuring curtain of smoke, parting it down the middle like a hot knife slicing butter. And then Crawford gasped, unable to believe his eyes.

There, far away, was a balloon of dust and dry grass boiling across the meadow—and then, in the next instant, the dust resolved, coalesced . . . into a Schmitt tank. The vehicle roared across the field, wheels churning earth and grass as the tank raced for the fire that was still raging across the field. But the tank wasn’t firing, and in another instant, Crawford saw why: its missiles were spent, and men clung to the turrets in a hodgepodge of arms and legs, and for dear life. And that one, unmistakable sign: that damn ten-gallon snapping to and fro like a banner.

Buck, my God, my God, they made it, they . . .

And then Crawford saw the fighters break their attack wedge and streak for the tank. *No, no, no!* Already pivoting, Crawford switched to an open channel. “Buck, *Buck!* Head for the fire, head for the fire, we’ll cover you, we’ll . . .”

A scream of fury spiked into his brain. “Nononono, *no, you DON’T!!*” And then Antonia Chinn was racing across the field, plunging into the smoke and fire.

“Chinn, *no!*” Crawford roared, but he was too slow, his ’Mech too battered, the lower leg actuator groaning with effort. “Chinn, come back, that’s an *order!*”

But Chinn’s *Thor* sprinted across the flame, eating up distance and moving with speed and terrible grace that were at once deadly and utterly beautiful. Chinn’s voice crackled with urgency. “Crawford, *go!* I’ll cover you! Get out of here! Go, *go!*”

“Toni, you can’t, you . . . !” His throat, raw from smoke, closed off, and he choked.

Before he could suck in another breath, he heard the Bounty Hunter say, “Go, Crawford,” and despite

everything, Crawford heard an eerie, preternatural intensity that was absolutely lethal with menace and determination. “You can’t do any good anyway. Leave her to me.”

Many months later, Crawford would turn that statement over in his mind again and again, looking for the nuance that betrayed the lie. But that was far in the future, and this was now.

Dazzling spears of laser fire danced around the two ‘Mechs. Chinn’s *Thor* was the more agile, and she dodged, returning fire from her remaining laser. But the *Marauder* was hit by a scarlet lance of laser fire that burned armor at its left shoulder and sent it reeling to the side, its back-canted birds’ knees locking as the machine betrayed its fatal flaw. Instead of tumbling, the *Marauder* staggered and swayed dangerously to the left.

“Keep going, Chinn, go,” grunted the Hunter, and Crawford imagined the man, ashen-faced, struggling to right his compromised machine. “I’m there, I’ll be right . . .”

A suck of air, and then a dull *boom*, and Crawford saw a swarm of thirty missiles spewing from the nose of the remaining *Oni* toward the *Marauder*. Without thinking, Crawford cut loose with his lasers as the Hunter raked the missiles with his PPCs and Gauss rifle. Some of the missiles detonated, fragmenting around the Hunter in a flaring halo, while others gouged troughs of destruction around the massive machine. Crawford couldn’t tell how many hit the Hunter, but the massive machine jerked, first right, then left, flailing like a drowning man in a whirlpool, and then, as the fighter howled toward the ‘Mech, the Hunter swung his Gauss rifle and battered the fighter from the sky.

“That’s it,” the Hunter said, his voice hitching, maybe in pain. “I’m out. No more slugs.”

Movement, and Crawford’s eyes snapped down, saw the Schmitt crashing through the fire and thundering for the cliff face. He shouted, “Buck, get your people down now, now, now!”

But finally, it seemed, their luck was turning from worse to not so bad, because the remaining fighter, a *Sholagar*, spun away, but slowly, almost teasingly—with Chinn moving out, trying to track the fighter for a target lock.

“Toni, let it go!” Crawford cried, but then Chinn’s voice cut in on a general frequency, and so everyone heard—and Crawford would remember it for the rest of his life.

“No choice, Andre.” Chinn’s voice was labored, but whether from pain or the heat—and, my God, it must be an inferno in that cockpit given all she’d gone through—Crawford didn’t know. “But he can’t . . . get away . . . because . . . they’ll know, they’ll . . . *know* . . . have *tostop* . . . !”

Then time slowed down, and Crawford saw everything that happened with that crystalline clarity that can only happen when a man knows that Death waits just around the bend. He saw the spear of Chinn’s laser take flight; saw the scintillating ribbon of concentrated energy tease the *Sholagar*’s port engine; watched the saucer tilt nearly on edge, loop and then come screaming back in a blur and with an almost maniacal joy, a pencil-thin tail of smoke diffusing behind like a gauzy black scarf, and maintain that course, on edge, presenting the least amount of surface area to its adversary.

And then time snapped back into itself, like a cable stretched to its limits, and Crawford understood the pilot’s strategy an instant too late because he had forgotten: These were warriors, too.

“*CHINN!*” Crawford screamed, whipping his lasers round, trying to acquire, but the *Thor* was in the way and he couldn’t, *he couldn’t* . . . ! “Get out of the way, *GET OUT OF THE WAY!*”

A brilliant flare, as bright as a hundred suns, and then Crawford's bellow of agonized fury mingled with a ball of thunder as the *Sholagar* smacked into the *Thor*'s canopy, hacking Chinn's scream in two as the *Thor* broke apart in a hail of molten armor and disarticulated limbs. Another mushrooming explosion as the *Thor*'s missile rack detonated in a successive series of three quick bursts; the burning meadow twitched, and aftershocks rippled through the legs of his 'Mech and into Crawford's brain. To his left, Buck's troops staggered, some tumbling to the ground, others breaking at the knee as if in prayer.

After all that had happened, it took Crawford a few moments to realize that everything had gone deathly, absolutely . . . still. He heard the faint roar of the sea behind and the crackle of the fire ahead. A squalling of metal, and he turned as the Bounty Hunter slid his *Marauder* into position at his right hand, so close that Crawford could see the vibrant green of the Hunter's neurohelmet through the *Marauder*'s ferroglass canopy.

"I want him dead." Crawford's voice was raw and sharp. Grief and rage lodged in his heart and squeezed. "I want him dead. You hear me? I want that son of a bitch *dead*."

"Yes, of course," said the Hunter. And then, after a pause, "Which one?"



Red Sands, Devil's Lot, Klathandu IV

Benjamin Military District, Draconis Combine

5 June 3135

"Well?"

The Old Master lifted both eyebrows. He was *inseiza*, tucked in the far right-hand corner of their holding cell, a three-meter square titanium cage occupying the furthest third of a small prefabricated metal hut. Bars of golden light from the setting sun illuminated tiny dust motes dancing in a lazy whorl. "Well, what?"

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Katana swept her hand in an all-inclusive gesture. The cage was bolted to the metal floor. A chemical toilet, obviously from the same manufacture that must supply the Combine's 'Mech's facilities, squatted in the left corner. At the opposite end of the hut there was a door, locked, and a guard beyond that. "Like, this makes about the fiftieth time I've tried to figure a way out of here, and so this is a waste of energy and time?"

"You already know that. But, clearly, plotting an escape gives you pleasure."

"It's something to do. Besides, it's galling—my fighter practically parked close enough to touch. And for a skeleton command there are plenty of people out there."

"Now there *is* something to ponder: why your intelligence was faulty."

"I was the one who thought of Klathandu. No use worrying about that now. But why haven't they taken us off-world? Maybe waiting for instructions," she mused. "Even tag team JumpShips take time, and they

have to go the long way around. But that's a problem. Sakamoto micromanages, has to be in on every decision."

"All good points and they do serve to neatly evade my comment."

"Which was?"

"That you made connections where none existed. Perhaps that was exactly what Sakamoto was counting on."

"He can't know how I think."

"On the contrary, he may know *exactly* how you think. It is an excellent possibility that he played on your pride. Or . . ." The Old Master paused then said, "You could question why you *allowed* yourself to be captured."

"Wait a minute." Katana dropped into a cross-legged *danza*, twitching her cloak around her body. She still wore her pilot's jumpsuit, and they'd left her the cloak, but the temperature dropped at night and the floor was chilly. "I didn't allow a damn thing."

"Of course, you did. Didn't you tell *Tai-i* Sagi we were his guests or prisoners?"

"That was a figure of speech."

"Well, I guess then we'll chalk it up to the good *tai-i*'s being quite literal. But you keep poking your finger in the coordinator's eye. Up to this point, the coordinator has failed to acknowledge you. So, trying to rouse his troops to insurrection . . ."

"They're Sakamoto's men."

"They are the *Combine*'s soldiers. If they defect, the coordinator can't ignore you. *That* is how you task him."

"That's ridiculous." An unbearable wave of heat rose in Katana's neck. "I'm not a child anymore."

"People's motivations frequently appear childish, but that doesn't make them any less valid, or important, nor are they trivial."

"So you think this was wrong?"

"On the contrary; it's similar to your trying to find a way to escape. You must try. It's neither right nor wrong; it is your pattern. But escape may not be in your control, just as you fail to consider another alternative regarding the coordinator."

"And that is?"

"Perhaps Sakamoto has gone rogue, and the coordinator waits on *you*."

"Me? Absurd. I'm just . . . some . . . some . . ."

"Some what? Someone who fights well and matured in spite of, or perhaps *because* of her struggles?"

Your path has been one of renewal and repair; Sakamoto's is chaos and destruction. Yet both may claim the same thing: retaking what is the Combine's by right of conquest and history."

But Katana was shaking her head. "I'm just not that important. If the coordinator wanted, he'd have acknowledged me by now."

"I have already said that there are many possibilities, but *you* must consider them all, just as you weigh an opponent in the dojo and learn when and how to strike . . . and when not. Kurita is a proud name, a noble House, and if there are any who can lay claim to embodying the true heart of the samurai, it is Kurita who watches and waits, like the samurai *inzanshin* ."

"But this isn't *kendo kata* ."

"No, it's life. So is being samurai. It's not something you shrug off as you do your *do* and *men* . Only the samurai who balances body, mind and sword has achieved *uwate* , true mastery. So, Samurai, tell me: which attack is most fierce?"

"*Ki-o-korosu*," said Katana, at once. "To summon *ki* , and attack with force."

"Exactly. And why?"

"Because you unbalance your opponent."

"How?"

"By spoiling his ability to center himself."

"Lovely book words, but what do they mean?"

Katana thought, then said, "If you attack with force, you cause fear and put your opponent on the defensive. She won't have time to think of a counteroffensive."

"Precisely. And this is where you find yourself. With or without the coordinator's blessing, Sakamoto has struck with *ki-o-korosu* . So far, you are only reacting defensively. Even this"—he spread both hands to indicate their prison—"has you thinking only of how you will escape, not what you will do when you have. When you are free—and you *will* be free because you imagine it—then you must decide which counterattack makes sense. *But* you must strike with all your spirit and might. And if you choose for the coordinator, you must cede your impulses to his wishes and greater wisdom—even if you believe they are incorrect. Life gives you opportunities, Katana, nothing more. It's up to you to use them wisely."

"But how can I know the coordinator's . . . ?" She broke off as the hinges on the hut's door squealed.

Ashujin appeared, followed by a guard. It was the same *shujin* whom they'd met with *Tai-i* Sagi. He carried a metal tray laden with covered dishes. Katana and the Old Master watched in silence as the *shujin* waited for the guard to unlock the cell door and then stepped in, squaring the tray on the floor near the door. Straightening, the *shujin* tugged his right cuff over a tattoo of gold-link chain and then gave a respectful bow.

"Your meal, Aged Parent. And yours, *Tai-sho* . Please," said the *shujin* as he backed out and the guard secured the cell door. "The night grows chill, the moon is new, and the meal is warm. Do not linger." The door to the hut clicked shut.

“Linger.” Katana pushed up from the floor. She paced the perimeter of the cell like an anxious leopard. “Like we have anything else to do. You go ahead. I’m not hungry.”

She heard a scrape of metal against metal. A pause. And the Old Master said, “For this, you might develop an appetite.”

Sighing, Katana turned. “I’m not . . .” she began, and stopped.

There, on a plate, were two pistols. And a key.

New Mendham Nadir Jump Point

Benjamin Military District, Draconis Combine

5 June 3135

Right before he’d drifted off in a tangle of sheets and blankets, McCain thought that, yeah, Viki was right. *Hehad* been tense.

The trip had been too long already, but Kamikuro insisted they take a circuitous route back to Proserpina. Couldn’t fault the man for that. By the time they’d left Junction, word was something was going on at the border worlds of Homam and Matar, though no one knew exactly what, and Kamikuro’s legitimate freighters, the ones under his employ for his various businesses, had caught channel chatter about what sounded like activity in Prefecture II. So, after mustering their forces—’Mechs and men armed with an assortment of Gauss rifles, pistols, vibrokatanas, and lasers, plus the precious black boxes—they’d taken the long way around: Junction, to Ludwig, to Reisling’s Planet, a week to recharge, and then on to New Mendham, where they were still parked. Before making the jump to Scheat, Kamikuro sent out a DropShip that in turn popped out two aerospace fighters to make recon in New Mendham space. In the meantime, Viki had observed that McCain needed to relax—so he did.

As it happened, he was literally drifting. Viki’s suggestion; she said weightlessness inspired the imagination. She hadn’t been wrong. Now, in the middle of a deep and dreamless sleep, his intercom buzzed. McCain jerked awake, wrestled with a twist of sheet then swam over and fumbled for the kill switch. “What?”

“*Chu-sa*McCain, I am sorry to disturb your . . . rest.” Kamikuro said this with delicacy. “But we have news.”

McCain washed his face with his hands. “What, uh, what about?”

“Klathandu IV.”

“But I thought we were going to Scheat.”

“As did I.” Another pause. “It seems *Tai-sho* Tormark had other ideas.”

“Has something happened to her?”

“I think it best we meet on the bridge. And, uh, do inform *Sho-sa* Drexel.”

“On my way.” McCain clicked off, ordered lights up, then pushed off, hooked a handhold and came to a hover beside a sheet-covered lump. “We got to go.”

“*Mmm-hummmph.*” The lump bunched, and then Viki Drexel pulled the sheet from her face, winced and groaned. “Too bright.” But when he told her, her gray eyes went wide. “That doesn’t sound good.”

They threw on clothes, brushed their teeth and headed out, pulling double-quick. Right before they darted onto the bridge, McCain held up so abruptly that Viki plowed into him and they tumbled in a triple somersault before McCain snagged a handhold with his left hand and Drexel’s waist with his right. “Oh, hell,” said McCain.

Drexel had tugged her hair into a ponytail, but the collision shook enough loose so she looked like a Medusa. “Now what?” she grouched, corralling her halo of hair.

“I just realized.” McCain pulled a face. “I’m all tense again.”

Red Sands, Devil’s Lot, Klathandu IV

Benjamin Military District, Draconis Combine Midnight,

6 June 3135

Things went better than they had any right to, starting with the guard they overpowered at changeover, to liberating Katana’s swords from Sagi’s office—and hadn’t that been interesting—and on to their skirmish on the airfield. In fact, all the way up to the very moment they’d hurriedly donned their suits, strapped in and rocketed away in a whirling ball of sand, everything went exceedingly well—until Katana got a gander at the three aerospace fighters in pursuit. Then she said, “Uh, oh.”

“Yes, two *Slayers* and a *Shilone*,” said the Old Master. “An excellent strategy.”

“Yeah, they can outrun us and outgun us.” Her *Lucifer* was an R-20, a newer model custom-made to accommodate two people and loaded with armor, but no missiles, only seven lasers, and not a lot of kick. There was no way the *Lucifer* could pull max thrust beyond eight g’s for long. Zippy enough and an equal match to the *Shilone* on their tail, but the other fighter could pull nine g’s, and the *Slayers* went one, two, three times better: not as much armor, but more heat, scads of lasers between all three, and long-range missiles to boot . . . and, well, she didn’t need to be a rocket scientist to figure this one out.

The only thing in her favor? A long shot but her only chance; her DropShip, a small *Fury*, hanging behind Klathandu IV’s only moon. Better armored, equipped with autocannon and LRMs, the *Fury* could lend punch if not speed. *If it’s still there.* Sagi might have found and destroyed the DropShip by now.

On the other hand, Sagi would’ve boasted of that. They’d faced off in his office—hand-to-hand and then her blade against his pistol. She hadn’t beheaded him, though she had whipped her blade in a killing blow—and stopped short, just as the edge bit his neck. Enough that she’d bloodied her blade, and she said, as they trussed him to his chair, “Remember I gave you back your life.”

Sagi was purple with rage. “When we meet again, I will not return the favor. Count on it.”

No, Sagi hadn’t found the DropShip, but she’d be damned if she led his fighters to it. *So we run, straight on until morning . . . or until they kill us.* She punched her afterburners to full power. The

Lucifer leapt forward, chewing up space. The center of her chest tightened; an unseen hand pushed against her chest, flattening her into her seat as she pulled seven g's. Her vision reddened; her pulse thudded in her temples; and she grunted, forcing blood to her head.

"I understand your tactic," said the Old Master, his voice labored. He was tracking from his instruments and HUD. "However . . ."

But she wasn't paying attention. On her HUD, she saw that the *Slayers* were dropping back . . . no, no, one was shedding altitude, and the other climbing. Frac! That wasn't it either! She was a fine pilot, but a better MechWarrior, and she was used to thinking in a grounded dimension, not about when the ground had no bottom.

She figured out what would happen an instant before it did. Suddenly her onboard computer shrilled a warning, and her eyes jerked to tactical. *Target lock!* Instantly, she broke right—the correct move—and lancets of port-side laser fire streamed past, wide of their target. But then Katana pushed her fighter into what would have been a dive in an atmosphere. A good move, but not when you were in space. . . .

Her heart banged into double-time as her alarms screamed again. *No, my God, what was she doing; she'd turned directly into the Slayer; it wasn't hanging back, it was rocketing y-axis and true, an arrow aimed directly at her heart . . .* "No!"

A volley of laser fire blasted her canopy. She instinctively flinched away from it so hard that her head slammed back into her couch then bulleted forward. Her helmet bounced off her instrument panel with a sickening thud, and her vision swam. Yanking the *Lucifer* hard left, she angled up and away, blinking away hot blood drizzling into her eyes from the seam split into her skin. She sent the fighter into a rolling Immelmann turn, climbing a vertical—an instinctive move because she was half-blind, her head shrieking with pain. Stars pinwheeled in a giddy, nauseating whirl, and sour bile pushed the back of her throat. The *Lucifer*'s instrument panel was alive with warning lights, her temperature climbing, and then the *Shilone* was screaming in from starboard. How had it gotten there? The last time she saw the fighter it was on her left, and there were too many of them, she couldn't fend them off, there were too many, this was out of control and she couldn't . . .

Stop! An inner voice, jabbing her brain like a hot spike. *You are samurai! Think as samurai!* Angry now, Katana blinked against her panic, clamping down with fierce determination on her fear. She was a *samurai*, a Daughter of the Dragon; she was Dragon! Katana's spirit gathered and bunched at the center of her being; her blood roared through her veins, marching to the beat of her warrior's heart.

Fight. Katana's eyes sought out the winking green indicators that were the enemy. There! The *Shilone* the point of a spear, and the two *Slayers* forming its body, and they'd made a mistake, yes, the bastards were too confident, and *they* were not samurai!

"Thank you!" Blood filled her mouth from her wound, and she savored the taste: warm salt and moist copper, and *her*, her essence, what made her Dragon . . . "Yes," she hissed, "*yes!*" Energy, hot and bright, flickered through her limbs, and she grabbed at this, *herki*, her energy, focusing a tight cone of determination that she *thought* on its way, pushing it from her brain with the force of a lion and the speed of a tiger. "Feel me coming for you, you bastards, because *here I am!*"

She jerked back on her stick and canted the *Lucifer* y-minus-thirty and z-minus-forty, twirled the craft along its long axis, and then jammed on her thrusters, pushing the ship for all it could muster. A fist slammed into her chest, but she hadn't felt it as *herki* flowed into the machine that throbbed beneath her, and they became one, racing through space. Because she was going to meet the bastards head-on; she

would drive right into their midst and give them a taste of their own medicine—and, oh, yes, she just might kill them, too.

Lasers sizzled by in silent streams of death, and she took hits—enough to send the *Lucifer*'s temperature soaring. And still the fighters came, arrogant in their combined strength, and this, too, was a fatal mistake because they thought that she would break first. Either that—or maybe try to ram.

“Yeah, and I bet you’re counting on that, too; you’re going to sit there and wait and let me come to you. Well, I’m coming, you fracing sons of bitches, just you wait . . .” Katana toggled her weapons up full, brought her HUD targeting display front and center, drew in a deep breath and then let it loose with a full, keening, battle cry: “*DO!*”

At that exact instant she cored into their midst, whirling like a dervish, and snap-fired all her lasers at once: full power. Lasers shot from her fighter in a scatter-sunburst of light and energy. Garnet streams streaked through space, unfurling like the deadly length of a thousand serpents, striking with lethal fangs in many places and all directions at once. The fighters broke apart from this demon in their midst; they fell away, twirling, scattering—but Katana was already turning around, whipping the straining *Lucifer* on its long axis, turning a sharp, hard, inverted loop, slamming her fighter from side to side so they couldn’t line up a shot and then came roaring down, snap-firing again.

And this time, she hit. “YES!” She let out a long whooping war cry as flares bloomed on the port wing of one *Slayer*. The larger fighter jogged down and then made a hard right, and she twisted, trying to keep the ship in sight and see; how badly was it hurt, had she . . . ?

A stuttering wink-wink-wink overhead and to her right, and then flashes, much too bright to be a laser and the wrong color . . .

“Missiles!” shouted the Old Master. “To starboard, z-plus-sixty!”

“HUNH!” Katana slammed her fighter into a zoom dive, roaring straight for the *Shilone* that was, at that moment, heading for her belly. She hesitated for a fraction of a second. No time to second guess! *Move, move, move, go, gogogogogo!*

“They’re still on us! Acquiring! Time to impact, eight seconds!”

“Oh, no, you don’t, you bastards, no, you don’t . . . YAH!” Jamming on the power, Katana bulleted directly into the *Shilone*'s line of fire, did the calculations with lightning speed, and let fly a burst of laser fire. Then she angled off, hard, skimming in the space perpendicular to the *Shilone* at the precise instant that her lasers punched through space, stopped short of the *Shilone*'s nose, and so the *Shilone* didn’t slow because, of course, the pilot knew that the blasts would come short.

Katana’s laser fire balled . . . and instead of following after Katana, the missiles locked on the roiling coil of laser fire, here and then gone in a second. But a second was all that mattered, and the *Shilone*'s pilot saw the danger and reacted, whipping around in an evasive zoom just as the missiles detonated.

The *Shilone* was too close. Shock waves and molten plasma boomed out in concentric circles. The smaller craft stuttered, then skipped, then tripped nose-first, out of control, spinning end on end the way a knife flies toward a target. The *Shilone*'s overtaxed systems gave, and the fighter tore itself apart in a silent, fiery shower.

She’d barely blinked before she heard the alarm. *Target lock!* Katana broke right, then left, angled off,

but she'd waited a fraction of a second too long. She couldn't hear the *Slayer*'s laser hissing through space, but she felt it: a jolting finger of death that torched a seam of destruction down the belly of her craft, opening the guts and cooking them at the same time. No, no, nonono, not now! Lasers functional but no starboard thruster at all, and port down to half . . . Grimacing, neck cords popping, she tried grabbing air that wasn't there, because this was space after all, and she'd run out of luck and time . . .

And then another shriek of an alarm, and she saw it, an avatar from Hell: the sleek, deadly form of an *Achilles* DropShip—headed straight for her.

"No," she said. The targeting alarm went off again, but she hardly heard it. She stared straight ahead, watching as Death lunged for her. She was surprised that she wasn't frightened or resigned. Instead, her warrior's heart beat more fiercely and, with fingers that barely shook and an iron will, she cut power to her remaining thruster and brought what energy remained to weapons. Maybe she couldn't kill the beast, but she would wound it, oh, yes.

But Death struck first. A thick, bright tongue of PPC fire spurted from the *Achilles*' nose, blistering through the blackness of space—past her.

The particle beam smacked the *Slayer* square on the nose, burning a trough of ionized plasma, and simply cut the ship in two. There was a brilliant flash as the *Slayer*'s missiles ignited, then a soundless explosion, and somewhere in there the pilot must also have screamed as his cockpit disintegrated. The pilot fell in silence, all of space a cold, impersonal witness, and Katana's cheeks were slick not with blood but tears.

Then a voice she hadn't heard in months fizzled through electromagnetic distortion: "Hang on, *Tai-sho*, we're coming!"

McCain. My God. She stared, blinked, and looked again, but it was there and no mirage: her *Fury* trailing in the *Achilles*' wake.

"*Tai-sho*!" *McCain* again, frantic now. "Katana, *Tai-sho*, do you copy?"

"*McCain*," she whispered. Dimly, she saw the lone surviving *Slayer* limping for Klathandu IV, and her *Fury* jumping to the pursuit—and it was this that finally jarred her voice loose. "McCain, no, let it go! There's been enough bloodshed for one day." And then she couldn't help it, but she was grinning like a madwoman. "And *Shu-sa McCain*, once I am aboard, let us have a chat about your timing. Shall we?"

Nagumo-Class DropShip Black Wind, inbound for Al Na'ir

Prefecture II, Republic of the Sphere

20 June 3135

And you, little Al Na'ir, are next.

Sakamoto was drunk, not on wine but power. Two highly successful attack waves; his last devastating assault on Yance, and now a flotilla of five Legion of Vega DropShips peopled with Benjamin Regulars

hurtling toward Al Na'ir. Pleased, he inhaled hugely, filling his lungs with the slightly metallic, slightly sweat-tinged aroma of the ship's recycled air, laced with just the faintest wisp of ozone. He preferred the astringent smell of 'Mech coolant on a fine winter's morning. But, alas, no 'Mechs; today, death would come from above and without.

Al Na'ir was a wretched place: clotted atmosphere rich in sulfur dioxide layered over, essentially, barren rock. Yet people insisted on living there. Sakamoto's keen eyes picked out the glints marking Al Na'ir's two domed cities, Phoenix and Homai-Zaki. Each had a defensive array of four weapons turrets studded at compass points on the dome's outer skin. Yet domes were, by their very nature, inherently indefensible. Each dome had perimeter weapons' bays but only two 'Mechs per station, the others pulled into service against the Capellans; aerospace fighter lances were down to half strength for the same reason. Any defense would be mounted well away from the cities, likely at DropShip docking sites that connected to underground maglevs because, once an enemy penetrated a dome, the battle was lost.

Still facing the bridge's viewscreen, he said, "What a horrible little planet. Look at it: moth-eaten, pockmarked, sulfur for air."

"True," said Worridge. She'd glided to his right shoulder and stood even with him now. Her tone was infuriatingly mild; the voice of reason that put his teeth on edge. "Therefore, I'm mystified that you bother with the planet at all."

"Question a strategy, and you question *me*, Worridge." Sakamoto paused to let that sink in. Besides, *he* saw them all listening, watching *judging* . . . Sakamoto's eyes roved over the sleek backs and blank profiles of *Black Wind*'s bridge personnel. No one turned, no one spoke, but Sakamoto knew that *they* knew he was wise to them all. *Think your thoughts, and plan your little coups, but I will always be one step ahead.*

Seemingly unfazed, Worridge said, "I meant no disrespect, but merely asked after Al Na'ir's strategic importance."

"*The importance* is not what's above but below. Scarsborough Manufacturing's there, and even though the plant doesn't make BattleMechs anymore, the works remain. Our techs will put them to good use. Besides, the troops deserve a rest before the next attack wave." Privately, Sakamoto didn't give a damn about the troops. Yet he was a realist. If they were to perform well, the men needed a breather. Besides, they had taken heavy casualties on Ancha (expected) and Biham (unexpected). Eriksson, that old devil, had wrecked three 'Mechs single-handedly before they'd brought him down. Sakamoto's *stai-sho* in command of the Biham spur, the Crimson Scourge Company of the Second Sword of Light, assured him that all necessary repairs would be completed in time for that spur's next stop, Deneb Algedi. Highly likely then that the old knight's *Orion* would see action just as soon as the 'Mech techs wiped its computer identification system. A delicious irony, there. Still, Eriksson was more trouble than he was worth. Sakamoto was inclined to execute him, and now he said as much to Worridge.

"But, as you've pointed out, *Tai-shu*, Eriksson will be a very effective bargaining chip, if and when Katana Tormark shows up. She's got a soft spot for that old man."

Sakamoto snorted. "With any luck, she's eating sand. Damn this outage anyway; it slows everything down. But no matter how skillful her people, Ancha and Sadachbia fell fast enough."

"We lost our fair share of 'Mechs and men."

"Inconsequential," Sakamoto piffled. But the Fury had fought much better than he allowed, and he knew

it. No match for *his* forces, of course, but still. Devil take it, but their victory had come at an *obscenely* high cost: a full company of aerospace fighters from the Sixth Benjamin Regulars, seven 'Mechs—three in a bog, *aswamp*, no less—and all because of the quick thinking of that wizard Crawford. Sakamoto could use a man like that.

But he won't be turned; I'm sure of that. The Fury's loyal to one commander, and she's pledged her loyalty now to the Dragon—and that's not me. Yet.

As if she'd read his mind, Worridge said, "Do you think the Fury would turn if you appealed to them in the name of the Combine?"

Damn her good sense! Always testing, always reasonable . . . Sakamoto's eyes shifted again over the faces and backs of the bridge crew. What none of them knew was how very hard Worridge had argued with him—in private, before the campaign.

She'd chosen his quarters for the confrontation. "The Fury's our kin, brothers and sisters," she'd said, those gray eyes bright and swimming with emotion. "*Tai-shu*, I beg you to reconsider. You have already violated the Ares Conventions and . . ."

"*Damn* the Conventions!" Sakamoto had been ready to explode. "I am the law here, and I answer to no one!"

"But the Fury could be our ally."

"They're a nuisance." Good for Worridge. He hadn't been drinking that day else he'd have killed her where she stood. Bringing up the Conventions and now the Fury . . . damn her, *why* did she have to be so valuable? "Why such the bleeding heart for Tormark?"

"Our troops admire her. Fighting the Fury will just make her more sympathetic."

True, and how *that* had galled him. Only a few months into battle, and already he'd had to arrest a dozen or so of Kobayashi's men, devil take it. Mutinous pirates. Well, let the rest of the troops see how he dealt with *that*.

Eventually Worridge had backed down, but now, here she was, throwing down the gauntlet *again* by invoking the Combine—and, by extension, Vincent Kurita—in front of the crew, emphasizing that she *knew* he had no authorization from the coordinator. Very well played: Argue, and he put Worridge on a level playing field, elevating her in the troops' eyes. That would *not* do. So Sakamoto chose his words with care: "There is an old saying, Worridge. A tool does not boast of its handler. We are tools, nothing more."

That stung, Sakamoto saw. A faint flush stained Worridge's pale cheeks. She'd followed his orders all along. Discredit him now by invoking Kurita, and she did the same to herself. "Well said, my *Tai-shu*," she murmured. "Of course, you're right."

She might have said more but *Black Wind*'s *stai-sa* said, tentatively: "A thousand pardons, *Tai-shu*, but I estimate five minutes to outer atmosphere." A pause. "And there are five aerospace fighters on approach."

"Excellent," said Sakamoto, turning aside from Worridge, effectively dismissing her. "A little warm-up; they're bugs, nothing more. Drop Ships *Crystal Rain* and *Honor's Pearl* are to engage the fighters.

Deploy our own fighters only if necessary. I want *Blood's Tide* and *Dragon's Sword* to target Homai-Zaki. As for us and *Serpent*, set course for Phoenix Dome." He paused, inhaled that wonderful scent—and yes, it was the scent of battle—and said, "Now."

Phoenix Dome, Al Na'ir

Prefecture II, Republic of the Sphere MIDDAY,

20 June 3135

Five hundred and fifty meters at its highest point, Phoenix Dome was a semirigid, bacterially derived plastic monomer, protected by a latticework of titanium steel and milky duraglass, injected with microscopic slurries of crystal steel built to withstand small meteor strikes. Al Na'ir's atmospheric pressure was a fifth that of Terra and principally consisted of sulfur dioxide clouds that clotted in dingy clumps the color of egg yolk. By contrast, the dome's air was sweet and always a balmy thirty degrees Celsius, except for occasional manufactured rainy days, and snow in December. Today, from the apex of Phoenix Tower, Prefect Priscila Recinto peered out her smeary office window at unscheduled rain and thought, *Right season, wrong color*.

There was a curfew in place; marshal law had been declared when the riots spiraled out of control two weeks ago. Columns of flak-vested police threaded through thoroughfares and alleys like busy ants scurrying through an immense hill. But the damage had been done. Soot mixed with rain drizzled in a gray curtain, slicking the streets with ash and glazing buildings and windows with a patina of grime.

A voice, hushed, male, at her shoulder: "It's Armageddon."

Recinto turned her soft brown gaze onto O'Mallory. The legate had lost weight, and the angles of his shoulders tented a dull slate-blue jacket. O'Mallory's cheeks were hollow, the hazel eyes just above set into deep sockets smudged with crescents of purple. "I think so," she said. She backhanded an oily shank of dull blond hair from her forehead. She was filthy; her nails were ragged and ridged with crescents of black. She hadn't showered in two days, ever since the water had gone out when the treatment plants blew, and all emergency water had gone for the fires. She wore the same sour-smelling clothes she'd slept in for the past two days, curled on her office couch.

O'Mallory said, "You should go to the shelter."

"Someone has to stay above ground, monitor the troops, lock out the sub-tee maglevs if necessary. I'm the only one who knows the codes." She managed a wan smile. "Anyway, how would it look, the prefect turning tail?"

"You shouldn't care a fig for what people think."

"But I do. Besides, I'm not sure I could face those people now, knowing that I've turned others away, decided who was important enough to live, and who wasn't." The words tasted bitter as ash in her mouth, and she grimaced. "Governor Tormark says it's the same in Homai-Zaki, and they have more police."

“Maybe we’ll save the Dracs the trouble by killing ourselves off.” A pause. Then, angrily: “This is my fault. If I hadn’t staked everything on the word of . . .”

“It’s not as if you acted alone. Fuchida agreed with you. Central Command agreed.”

Another pause, longer this time. “Do you think . . . there are the Ares Conventions, but do you think we . . . would the Dracs dare to . . . ?” Whatever O’Mallory wanted to say died in his mouth, and she read in his eyes something just short of despair.

“Yes,” she said, simply. “I think they might.”

DDT-Alpha, Second Al Na’ir Principes Guards

Phoenix Dome, Al Na’ir

Midday, 20 June 3135

Lieutenant Russ Fox couldn’t see for shit. Then again, you never saw for shit outside the dome, even if your butt was parked in a Dome-Defense Turret six hundred fifty meters above ground, the way his was right now. Tourists who came to Al Na’ir said the dome looked like half an orange the way it nestled in a ring of iron-rich crags. If that were true, then Fox figured the defensive turrets were off-center navels: pressurized nubs of armored ferroglass seated on the dome’s skin at the points of the compass. Each turret was connected to a rigid umbilicus sheathing a turbo-elevator that fed down into the dome via a magnetic lock. The lock was active, the meter-thick titanium hatch shut tight. The military engineers, real eggheads, said that even if the capsule sheared away, that hatch was thick enough so the dome wouldn’t breach. Probably made the folks in the dome real happy, real secure, but it made something else real crystal. Something like that happened, and Fox could kiss his ass good-bye.

The turrets weren’t airtight, or depressurized; their air supply and pressurization were tied into the dome. The turret reeked of fear and the smell of men crammed into too small a space for too many hours. Besides Fox, there were two gunners, each manning a twin-barreled autocannon on swivel mounts, one above and one below, so each gunner could turn his weapon either clockwise, or counterclockwise independent of the other gunner. Fox monitored comm, relayed orders, gave updates—about as essential to their ops as coals to Newcastle, whatever that meant.

Right now the comm channel fuzzed with interference, but he heard voices—overlapping and chattering the way squirrels scolded a cat curled at the base of a tree—until he heard the commander tell everyone to shut the fuck up, which they did. The sudden silence rang in his ears, and his skin prickled with anxiety. So when one of the gunners ripped a big one, really loud, that did it. They all three cracked up, hugging their sides, punching each other on the shoulder, pulling faces, and going *peeooweee, who let the dog in . . .* and that felt good, really good, because, for a minute, things felt almost kind of normal. Almost.

Still grinning, Fox peered left and right and behind. The remaining turrets, Beta through Delta, natch, were lit; he saw dim outlines of heads and arms. Then he turned right again, brought a pair of digital binoculars to his eyes, focused on the ground far below. Infantry in battlearmor boiled out of the air locks, fanning out through the plains before the mountains to take up defensive positions around the dome. Not many of them either, maybe a company, but no more.

Then he looked up into the soup of Al Na’ir’s atmosphere. And then his stomach bottomed out.

“God,” he heard one of the gunners say. “Aw, God.”

Dimly, Fox heard a crackle on comm, something about incoming, but as the black hulk of a DropShip barreled through the clouds, he thought: *Shit, man. Old news .*

Delta Company

Triarii Protectors, Al Na'ir

Dumb idea, ducking into a couloir, hoping all that iron ore would mess up the Dracs' sensors. What the hell was the lieutenant thinking, his guys all jammed up . . . Sergeant Mike Brautigan dodged left as another PPC bolt punched rock twenty meters away and fifty meters overhead, close enough so the shower of debris spewing from the mountains pattered on Brautigan's battlearmor with a sound like hard rain spiking a tin roof. A second later the ground twitched, vibrations jaggng through rust-colored rock. A slag of mixed iron ore and shale fell away from the mountain and sluiced a river of splintered boulders and pulverized rock.

Another blast, and this time Brautigan lost his balance and pitched forward. A spike of rock rushed up to meet his face. "*HUNH!*" He threw himself right, felt the bone-jarring crunch of rock against his shoulder instead of his faceplate, felt the freeze of terror that maybe he'd breached his suit. He waited for an alarm or the hiss of escaping air, but there was neither, and after a few more seconds Brautigan rolled onto his hands and knees like a dog. *Ho, boy, that was close .*

Staggering upright, Brautigan hugged the mountain because, shit, it was the only thing he *could* do at the moment. Another blast, further away this time; the DropShip moving off, or maybe losing him finally, or not caring because Brautigan was target practice. In the distance, across a plain of craters and rubble, he could just make out the neon orange sputter of tracer fire spitting from the dome defense turrets, and the smaller, almost comical ruby darts of lasers from infantry—like they made a difference. Phoenix Dome was dark, probably to cut down on glare. Hugging rock, he waited for what seemed like a fracing year but was probably closer to twenty seconds.

Men began to coalesce out of the haze—the atmosphere was already mustard yellow, and now it was choked with red dust churned up by pulverized rock—jogging silhouettes that resolved into arms and legs and rifles. He counted heads, thought that wasn't right, counted again, understood that what was left amounted to little more than a platoon, and then asked the nearest soldier, a scrawny corporal with ears like car doors, "Where's the lieutenant?"

"*LIEUTENANT'S DEAD!*" The corporal was screaming, like he was shouting down a long tunnel. He was crying, too. "*HE . . . HE GOT HIT . . . FIRST THING, PPC . . . CUT HIM IN TWO . . . AND . . . AND . . . !*"

They didn't have time for this. Brautigan didn't blame the kid; he was ready to piss his pants, too, but there was no time. "Stop that!" Brautigan rapped. "Stop that shit, shut up, shut up!"

That shook the corporal and everyone else, the rest of the men flinching back like they'd been slapped. But the kid stopped crying, and Brautigan said, "Okay, listen up. Near as I can make out, those seven, eight MiningMechs, the ones they got refitted with autocannon, got junked the first five, maybe ten minutes. But I think a DropShip's trying to touch down on the other side of the dome, and that's where they've screwed up because the secondary air lock's *on this* side." He punched up a SatNav receiver on his wrist, waited until the positioning satellites in orbit got a lock (thanking Christ there were satellites left to ping), and then said, "Okay. The secondary air lock is maybe three clicks away, give or take. That puts the Dracs, what, fifteen, sixteen clicks distant. Once they figure they blew it, though, they'll be on

their way, and fast.”

“Then we got to get there first,” said a PFC. His armored hands clutched his rifle like a club. “Once they breach the air lock, man, it’s over. Access to the city, anywhere they want to go. We got to get there first, get inside, disable the maglevs from inside and seal it up tight.”

Good idea, but it wouldn’t work. “It wouldn’t work,” said Brautigan. “We abandon the surface, no one’s left to keep the Dracs back. Only a matter of time before they get through, and then they pick us off, one by one.”

“Or the other way around,” said the PFC, but another soldier was shaking his head and said, “Naw, Sarge is right. You got to figure the Dracs could tunnel their way in, cut into the side, and then they bottle us up on both ends, like moles. Sides, there’s way more of them than there are of us.”

“Okay, so we’re fucked no matter what,” said Brautigan, “but I figure we can take it standing on the surface, or we can maybe jury-rig the air lock somehow, maybe blow it up tight, seal off the dome. They ain’t gonna torch the dome to get at us, no way.” He didn’t know if he really believed this, then thought there was a pretty good chance he was right. Dracs weren’t Blakists, and there were the Ares Conventions and a kind of code in war besides, like that unwritten rule that said no blowing up JumpShips, stuff like that.

“Sarge.” The scrawny corporal still sounded piss-your-pants scared. “Sarge, we do that, we’re stuck out here.”

But the PFC answered. “The prefect does it first, we’re just as stuck. Come on, man.”

“No choice,” said Brautigan, his voice flat, the period at the end of a sentence, and he saw from the way the guys looked first at each other and then back at him that they got it. He nodded once. “Right. Okay. Let’s go.”

They jogged over rocks, going almost by feel because Brautigan didn’t want to chance their helmet headlamps and tip off the Dracs. No one spoke. The only sounds Brautigan heard were his own harsh grunts as he huffed over broken earth and around jagged rock. Not hearing anything else, on band or through feed, was bad. He switched over to the general comm channel, got the hiss of dead air, and kept fiddling with frequencies, hoping to catch hold of something. He didn’t, and he tried hard not to think about *whatthat* meant.

Suddenly he heard a shout, sharp as an ice pick in his ear, and he flinched, clapping a free hand in a reflex to his ear and thumping against his helmet instead. For a wild second he thought that he’d got hold of some command frequency, but he looked around and saw the PFC pointing. Brautigan looked back toward the dome. They were close. He was startled to see how much ground they’d covered; the wall of ferroglass shot through with titanium rose out of the valley floor so high he had to crane his neck all the way up just to catch a glimpse of that crazy, orange peashooter tracer fire. *pfft-pfft-pfft* .

The massive bulwark of a DropShip splintered the clouds, and then Brautigan saw the DropShip change course, and it was . . . oh, God, no, it wasn’t possible . . . But it was.

The DropShip opened fire. At the dome.

“Here they come!” screamed Fox, but the gunners were already firing off round after round from their autocannons. The roar was deafening, like being caught in the middle of an echo chamber with cannons booming all around. With each shot the turret jumped and shimmied, so violently Fox was sure the thing would shake itself loose of its moorings and spill them, screaming, to shatter against the rocks hundreds of meters below. But the sensation had to be from the inner plastic monomer layer; sure, that had to be it; the thing jiggled the way gelatin did in a bowl; it was built to be that way, absorb seismic activity and crap like that; so, yeah, they were safe, they were perfectly safe . . .

“Go for the engines!” He had to shout into each gunner’s ear to be heard over the boom of autocannons. Far below, he saw the twinkle of lasers as the infantry, or what was left of them, tried doing something, *anything* . “Knock them out before . . . !”

But the gunners were already firing, their muscles bulging against their tight, sweat-stained sleeves, their arms going in herky-jerky fits as the cannons pulsed.

PPC fire, its color a sick pea green in the sulfur-rich atmosphere, stabbed at the dome. Fox felt the jerk as it hit, then watched in horror as the top half of Beta Turret was sliced in two. The oxygen inside ignited, and the explosion haloed into a yellow-orange fireball.

It was over so quickly—one second there and the next gone—that Fox felt the surreal sensation of time slowing, and sounds—the autocannon fire, the grunts of his gunners, the creak of the swivel mounts—fading away to muffled pinpricks. As if through a fog, Fox saw two fiery spears leap from the nose of the DropShip—a *Nagumo*, *huge motherfucker*—and score the dome where Beta Turret had been, unzipping the titanium-injected duraglass the way a hot knife cuts a seam through frozen butter.

Beneath his feet, Fox felt the hard shell of the dome begin to shiver. He felt the dome begin to break. And time snapped back.

She’d keyed out the maglevs six minutes ago, but it felt to Priscila Recinto that six years had passed, maybe seven. The city was dark, and so she saw things much more clearly now: the mammoth hulks of the two DropShips, edged with green lights; the pencil-thin darts of fiery laser fire; the orange balls of autocannon. Each time one of the turrets fired, a sonic boom of thunder rolled through the dome, the windows shuddered under her fingertips and the building swayed.

Suddenly, there came a huge, ear-splitting *ka-BOOM!* Recinto blinked against a flare of yellow bright enough to hurt. The flash had come from above, and her eyes jerked to the dome just in time to catch a cluster of explosions, one right after the other as Beta Turret’s munitions ignited. “Oh, God!” she gasped. She and O’Mallory were standing side by side, and she grabbed for his arm with her left hand, found it, squeezed. “Oh, my God, oh, my . . .”

High overhead, the air split with a grating, squealing sound as the turret twisted upon the titanium latticework of the dome. Then, there was an audible *snap* , like the crack of a dry branch, and still Recinto thought: *Maybe it’s not so bad; maybe all we need is a repair crew up there, yeah, yeah, seal off the breach because it’s so small, no way the air can leave the dome that fast . . .*

And then she heard something else. Something new. A hiss; first faint, and then louder, like a warning from a hidden, monstrous serpent—or, maybe, a dragon.

Prefect Priscila Recinto let O’Mallory take her into the circle of his arms, and she clutched the lapel of

his jacket, pressing her face into his chest. In another moment she felt his fingers massaging her scalp and cupping the back of her head the way her father did when she was very young and had a bad dream.

And then—she felt her ears pop. And she thought: *That's bad, it's bad when your ears pop because that means there's been a change in pressure, the dome's depressurizing, the dome's going to . . . !*

She made a move to pull away, but O'Mallory's hand was there, and she heard him say, "Don't look, child. Don't look."

Phoenix Dome exploded.



Conqueror's Pride, Proserpina

Prefecture III, Republic of the Sphere

25 June 3135

Crawford stopped talking, but Katana, face creased with grief, said nothing. He'd expected that, would've wondered if the news hadn't hit her like a sledgehammer: Chinn and Sully dead, Ancha and Sadachbia gone; Magruder and her people probably dead, too.

Katana cleared her throat with a visible effort. "Any ideas about the traitor?"

"Well, I can think of one person."

"Fusilli?"

"Yeah."

After a moment, Katana shook her head. "The thing is, some of his information was right on the money. So maybe he was compromised."

Crawford considered this, nodded. "I can buy that. He was with Magruder, and so far as we know, they're all dead. But the stuff about the troops defecting . . . let's just say that it was lucky McCain showed when he did."

"Not pursuing that last *Slayer* helped more," said Katana. This had helped Sagi see the light and "donate" his services, and those of his men, to Dragon's Fury. *With a DropShip or two as persuasion, and a cadre of yakuzato boot.* Sighing, she pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. "Still don't know if we should get involved, though."

"Of *course* we should. Sakamoto killed our people."

"We get involved, and he's likely to kill a lot more."

"For God's sake, those are *my* people lying out there, and Magruder's, and you're telling me that . . ."

“Every single last soul out there is one of *my* people,” Katana said, quietly. “*My* soldiers—and Chinn.”

Chastened, Crawford said, “Forgive me, *Tai-sho*. I feel so . . . *powerless* .”

“I understand.” Katana let out a long breath then pushed up from her tatami and began to pace. The Old Master, at his usual post, held his peace. “You dispatched word to Hean?”

Crawford nodded. “Figured they would pass the word to Sirius and, if they can, Irian. Rusch’s on Irian, and he’ll need the most time to prepare to retake Ancha and . . .”

But Katana was already shaking her head. “That’s exactly what Sakamoto expects. No, we have to hit places that’ll surprise him.” She gave Crawford a tight-lipped smile. “His jugular and his ass. Strike at his rear for sure—Shinonoi, Halstead Station.” She paused. “Biham.”

“I remind you that Biham’s spitting distance from Ancha and Sadachbia.”

“I’m aware of that. But I have to know what happened to Sir Reginald.”

“You really think he’s alive?”

“A knight can be an asset, a damn good bargaining chip. If it was me? I’d keep him alive.”

“Okay,” said Crawford, not sure if it was. “Tell me again how we’re going to do this without getting our butts kicked.”

“Any butt that gets kicked will be Sakamoto’s. First off, I’ll want Drexel to lead the Shinonoi spur.”

“McCain won’t like it. I haven’t seen daylight between those two.”

Katana arched an eyebrow. “*Chu-sa* McCain will be pleased to hear that I’m assigning him to her unit.”

“Probably make her day. I’ll take Halstead Station . . . *now* what’s wrong?”

“Because you’re coming with me, and *I’m* going to Galatia. We don’t have enough JumpShips to tag team, but *wedo* have those black boxes. We give some to Rhodes, and then have him pass them to our commanders on Ronel, Hean and Sirius.”

“To go for . . . ?”

“Deneb Algedi for sure. Niradaki, probably. Sakamoto will be expecting resistance from Bannson’s Raiders, right?”

“So?”

“*So*, the Raiders control Saffel and Anthry. Even Sakamoto’s resources aren’t infinite. My guess is he won’t leave more than a token force behind on Niradaki, figuring his rear’s covered.”

“Okay, I can see it. And, yeah, Deneb Algedi makes sense, too, now that the Swordsworn are gone. Sakamoto’s invasion force ought to be correspondingly small. But why not take on Al Na’ir? Come in from the flank and the rear at once?”

“Because those domes are like the bull’s-eye on a target,” said Katana. “Can you imagine the manpower necessary to keep people in a bottle from going nuts? We skip it. If we take four or five worlds from Sakamoto, control some of his supply lines, we’re doing well. And we might get lucky again. Sagi’s come over. If we dial down when we engage Combine forces, we may get more converts.”

Crawford was so shocked he couldn’t respond for a moment. “Dialdown? What the hell are you talking about? For God’s sake, Katana, that’s what *my* people did and they’re *dead* .”

“Do the math, Andre. We don’t measure up. Our only hope is *not* swoop in like avenging angels. We fight . . . but we dial it down.”

“And wait until they mop the planet with us,” said Crawford. He was angry now, and that made him cruel. “Chin *died* for you. She *died everything* for you and *shedied* . What kind of love doesn’t demand blood for blood?”

That hurt; he could tell by the way her features froze, and when she spoke, her words vibrated with barely suppressed emotion that told him he was very lucky she hadn’t drawn her blade and killed him on the spot. “I will avenge her; make no mistake. But there is only one man I hold responsible, and that is Sakamoto. The best way to honor Toni—to avenge *all* my people—is to defeat Sakamoto.”

“How?”

“We take away his base of support. We have a much better chance if we strike the worlds where he’s been gone awhile. Troops get tired; they want to go home; they want to know they’re appreciated. If I’m right about Sakamoto, he doesn’t give a damn about his people. That’ll be our advantage. What is a general without his troops but just a guy in a fancy uniform?”

“Uh-huh,” said Crawford. “Well, speaking of fancy clothes, let’s think this through, shall we?” He knew he hovered perilously close to insubordination, but then figured, screw it: He could only die once. “What about the coordinator? Sagi said Sakamoto went without authorization, but who’s *Sagi*? No one.”

“That’s why, when I meet Sakamoto, I will come as his ally.”

“*What?* You just said . . .”

“We’ll still do a rearguard action, no question. But if I don’t offer to talk, that’s reason enough to turn us into grease spots. Offer to negotiate in front of witnesses, and he’ll have a harder time killing us.”

Crawford hesitated, then said, very carefully, “You are *my tai-sho* . I will follow you to death if need be. But you are *insane*, and I want that on the record because you know what else? After what happened to Toni and Sully, if you get yourself killed? Katana, you’ll think you deserved it.”

They stared at one another a long moment. Finally, Katana broke the silence. “Noted. You are dismissed, *Chu-sa* .” Then, as he reached the *shoji*, Katana said, “Crawford, one more thing.”

Ah, his last name. Meant he was in the shit house for sure. Crawford met Katana’s steely gaze. “Yes, *Tai-sho* ?”

“The Bounty Hunter’s *Marauder II* is in our hangar, but there is no Hunter. Do you know where he is?”

It wasn’t what he’d expected, but Crawford was ready just the same. “No,” he lied.

Field Hospital, Fourth Sword of Light, Ancha

Prefecture II, Republic of the Sphere

25 June 3134

Chu-sa Leo Montgomery scrubbed grit from his eyes. All he wanted was five hours of sleep, but instead he'd been operating nonstop, resecting bowel, digging out shrapnel, amputating limbs, and now he was elbow-deep in administrative crap, too. Montgomery sighed, fingered the *tai-i*'s paperwork from his desk, and squinted at the pilot still patiently at attention. "*Tai-i* . . ." Montgomery scanned the paperwork. "Goddard . . . you're sure? You're entitled to go home."

"Quite sure," said Goddard. "Honor demands that I go back to the front lines."

Montgomery scrutinized the aerospace pilot. Goddard was disconcertingly tall for a pilot; most pilots tended to be small men, and there was something about his face Montgomery didn't care for. Not just the scar jaggging through his left eyebrow and cheek; a souvenir from the crash. No, something else . . . the eyes? Montgomery gave himself a mental shake. "I appreciate your zealousness, but . . ."

"Please, Doctor," said Goddard, and his voice had an insistent edge that made Montgomery uneasy. Goddard must've seen this because he smiled, and Montgomery didn't know which was worse; the man's tone, or that smile that sent icy fingers tripping up his spine. "I want to fight. Please, transfer me back to Silver Wing of the Forty-third Aerospace based on Al Na'ir. That's where I'm needed."

That smile, and those eyes . . . Montgomery cleared his throat. "Very well, since you're so eager." Montgomery's pen jittered as he scrawled his signature—illegible, he knew, but cut him some slack, he was a doctor—and handed the papers over to the pilot.

Still, Montgomery stared at the closed door for some time after the *tai-i* left. No, it wasn't the smile. It was the eyes, those cold, gray eyes. *Like a corpse; no, a devil* . . .

Scarsborough Manufacturers, Al Na'ir

Prefecture II, Republic of the Sphere

25 June 3135

"Bah! That is no answer!"

"That is the only answer I will give," said the *chu-sa*. She was a tall woman, with a purple-black bruise staining her right cheek, and a defiant snap to her light blue eyes.

"Do not tell me what you will or will not give!" Sakamoto seethed. They were in the CEO's office. The air was bad, close with burnt cordite, the gassy smell of decaying flesh, and a faint but distinctive scent of bitter almonds. Tasted bad enough to make Sakamoto want to spit. "And these empty threats that Dragon's Fury will crush us. *You* overestimate your importance."

"Perhaps *you* overestimate your reach. The coordinator will never let this stand. It is one thing to defeat Republic forces, but quite another to target troops who have pledged their loyalty to . . ."

“To a woman who *isnot* the coordinator!” And now Sakamoto *did* spit: on the *chu-sa*’s right MechWarrior boot.

A gasp from Worrige at his right elbow. “*Tai-shu*, I don’t think . . .”

“Silence, Worrige!” Sakamoto raged, without turning around. “When I *want* your opinion, I’ll *ask* for it!”

The Fury’s *chu-sa* stared at the spittle that had washed out a circle of dust and then back at Sakamoto. “You demean yourself, *Tai-shu*. A samurai has honor and honor demands respect . . .”

“Given to *whom*? Traitors?” But he was shamed nonetheless, and it wouldn’t do to let Worrige or that skinny *chu-sa*—Magruder, yes—see this in his eyes. So Sakamoto turned aside, eyeing the prisoners. They were a mixed bunch, bedraggled and exhausted: Phoenix Dome survivors—officials, mainly, and their families—flushed like rats from underground shelters. Scarborough Manufacturers’ employees and their CEO, a plump, bald little man, seized when Sakamoto’s troops stormed their below-ground facilities. The lot of them had junked sorely needed repair equipment and tried to blow up the complex! *That* fiasco cost Sakamoto three full platoons.

Then Sakamoto’s eyes came to rest on two prisoners: one in an orange jumpsuit, who sported a cane in his right hand and a grimy cast that stretched from the toes of his right foot to his hip; a second whose white shirttails dangled like tongues. “What about you, Eriksson?” Sakamoto said to the man with the cast. “Where is your beloved exarch now, eh?”

The old knight pushed himself erect. An effort, clearly. The knight had been captured when his ‘Mech’s missile rack exploded. Eriksson had ejected, his right femur snapping like a dry twig when he hit. “I’m a realist, Sakamoto. I’m only one man. If need be, my life is forfeit for a greater good.”

“Pretty words, but *I’m* your reality now.” Sakamoto turned his glare on the man with the shirttails. “Isn’t that right, Governor Tormark? What do you think of your intrepid little cousin?”

“Second cousin,” Tormark amended. He was not as tall as Eriksson, and his skin was a light cinnamon color. “What she does is none of my concern. But at least she’s humane. *You* are a barbarian. Destroying Phoenix Dome flies in the face of decency . . .”

“Yes, but this *barbarian* brought you to heel, didn’t he?” Sakamoto’s lips twisted in a malignant grin. “Pity about Fuchida; politicians really shouldn’t play with guns. But you surrendered quickly enough.”

Tormark’s face flushed a dull copper. “To save the dome. You left me no choice.”

“You had a choice. You just didn’t like the alternative.” But Sakamoto was weary of this game. Stuck on this horrid little planet until the men had rested, and their repairs completed, a process that would now take that much longer . . . “Enough of this.” Sakamoto turned to the little CEO. “You,” he said, and then took aim at a Fury infantryman, a haggard female corporal, with an index finger. “And you. Step forward.”

The owner complied, but the corporal shot a quick glance at Magruder, who said, “If you have anything to say or do, Sakamoto, you will say it to me.”

“I do not require your permission, and I am done talking to you for the time being, *Chu-sa*.” He jerked his head at the corporal and the CEO. “Guards, take them to the surface. Now.”

There was a second when no one moved. Then the color drained from Magruder's face, and Worridge said, aghast, "*Tai-shu*, with all due respect . . ."

"Shut up, Worridge." When he saw his guards hesitate, Sakamoto said, "Do it. *Now* ."

There was no mistaking the menace in his voice. The CEO's face was so pale his eyes looked painted on, and his legs nearly buckled when a guard hooked a hand around his right arm. Sakamoto saw the female corporal's throat working, but she said nothing.

"*Tai-shu!*" Magruder started forward, but a guard blocked her. "*Tai-shu*, please, don't do this."

"So, now you respect my title, eh?" Sakamoto looked down his nose at Magruder. "Tell me what I want to know: the precise location of Fury's troops and capabilities."

He saw the struggle in Magruder's face. "No," she said.

"Fine. Then you will have the pleasure of watching two prisoners die every two hours until you tell me what I want to know, or I run out of prisoners." He gestured for the guards to take the two away.

The CEO's office had a viewscreen covering one wall, and Sakamoto made them all watch and listen from beginning to end. Sakamoto shot Worridge a sidelong glance; her features were pinched and strained. *Ah, Worridge; I've got my eye on you.* Muting the audio, Sakamoto turned away from the viewscreen as the female corporal was in her death throes: back arched, mouth open, gouts of blood slicking her chin and throat. "I ask you again, Magruder. Tell me what I want to know."

Magruder's face was white as salt. "No."

"Very well. Guards." And then, as the guards were herding the prisoners away, Sakamoto pointed, said, "That one. Bring him here." He caught the quick flash of fear on the man's face: a swarthy *sho-sa* with a touse of black hair.

Magruder said, sharply, "Why do you want him?"

"That is none of your concern." He watched as the two Fury soldiers exchanged wordless glances. When the prisoners had shuffled out, he turned to Worridge. "Leave us. Tell the guard I want wine."

Worridge opened her mouth, closed it, bowed and left. Flopping down in a high-back black leather wing chair, Sakamoto waited. Wary, the *sho-sa* said nothing. An aide appeared, silver salver with a decanter and goblet in hand. He squared the tray upon a low table, bowed and was dismissed. Sakamoto picked up the decanter, uncorked it and splashed a rich, nutty-smelling port into the goblet. "Sit," he said, indicating the chair opposite. "Drink with me."

"Yeah, sure," said Wahab Fusilli. He dropped into the chair, groaned and drained the goblet in three huge gulps. "You people sure took your sweet time acknowledging my signal."

"The price of authenticity. Be glad you're alive," Sakamoto said, refilling Fusilli's goblet. Then he took a pull from the decanter, sighed with satisfaction, and wiped his mouth with the back of one hand. "And now, you will tell me the precise composition and location of Katana Tormark's remaining troops. Everything."

Imperial City, Luthien

15 July 3135

“Executed every last one of them?”

“Except for Governor Tormark and Sir Eriksson, yes, we believe so,” said Bhatia, his expression grave even as his heart was jumping for joy. The horrors in his report had been many, and extraordinarily graphic, all thanks to his agent embedded in the front lines. He watched as the Peacock, dressed today in black velvet, with gold thread embroidered in fussy curlicues, digested this information.

“Sakamoto has ignored a direct order,” said Kurita, finally. “Which course of action would you recommend?”

I must play this just right. Bhatia had begun this meeting already on his guard; for some reason, his coordinator had anticipated a need and assembled a command circuit for his return trip from Terra, where he had gone to attend the funeral of Victor Steiner-Davion. Instead of arriving home as expected in September, he was here now. *A coincidence, that he rushes home just as Sakamoto launches his offensive?*

“With all due respect, *Tono*,” Bhatia began cautiously, “you asked the *tai-shu* to wait until the time was right. That is quite different from disobedience. Certainly, there’s ample precedent. Previous coordinators have allowed—indeed, *encouraged*—independent action by being deliberately vague. So long as Sakamoto doesn’t proclaim *against* you, he’s your agent.”

“Yes, but he has not proclaimed *for* us either.”

“But look at what Sakamoto has accomplished. He has reclaimed many of the Combine’s lost jewels one by one.”

“And you believe he should be rewarded.”

Bhatia inclined his head. “Serving the coordinator should be reward enough.”

“Yes, well,” Kurita said dryly, “somehow we don’t believe our esteem is quite what the good warlord is looking for. Where, exactly, do you believe the estimable Sakamoto can possibly go?”

“Go?” echoed Bhatia, confused. “Why, it’s clear that Dieron . . .”

“No, no, stop being so literal. We meant what *position* can Sakamoto possibly covet that he does not already have? There is only one, wouldn’t you agree?”

The hackles prickled along Bhatia’s neck, but he kept his expression neutral. “I cannot nor do I speak for the warlord, *Tono* .”

The Peacock’s lips twitched into the ghost of a smile. “No?” And then he answered his own question. “No. After all, you and Sakamoto are not in league with one another to depose us. But here you’ve

amassed all this intelligence and you've not pointed out what is so obvious a blind man could see it with a cane. Sakamoto has clearly hoarded a great deal of materiel for himself in anticipation of just such a day. He has not informed us of his actions, nor has he asked our blessing. He simply acts. So we ask you, Director"—Kurita looked through his lashes—"when do you think, exactly, Sakamoto will do either?"

Well played. The Peacock still had a surprise or two up his gaudy sleeve. "Perhaps *Tai-shu* Sakamoto wants to wait until Dieron has fallen."

"That doesn't answer the question." When Bhatia opened his mouth in rebuttal, Kurita held up a jeweled hand, palm out. "Here is what we said: We told Sakamoto not to act until the time was right. Well, wouldn't you think that time is now?"

Bhatia hesitated. What was the Peacock really asking? He opted for vagueness. "The time is whatever my coordinator wishes."

Kurita stared a moment then chuckled. "We'd forgotten how adroit you are. Very well, Director. We thank you for your report."

It was a clear dismissal. Bhatia opened his mouth, checked his reply, bowed instead, and left. When he'd gone, Vincent slid into a chair at his workstation, depressed a control, and dictated a message. When he was done, he encrypted the message, copied it to a data crystal, and popped the crystal into the palm of his hand. Then he thumbed a call button and, when an aide appeared, said, "We have an errand for you." He proffered the crystal. "Arlington. At once."

Commanding General Headquarters

New Alamo, Terra

Prefecture X, Republic of the Sphere

15 July 3135

"You call this an *intelligencenetwork*?" Commanding General Tina Magnusson-Talbot was a big-boned woman, with a whiskey burr, ash-blond hair, and a thick middle from years of pushing paper and what she perceived rightly as the usual bureaucratic cow crap. The general aimed a blunt, nicotine-stained index finger at her intel director, a long-suffering lieutenant colonel named Larry Coleman, and fired another salvo. "You people couldn't figure out what I had for breakfast much less what's going on in those Dracs' heads. *Look* at this garbage." She tossed a ream of papers onto her desk, already brimming with paper and three ashtrays loaded with crumpled butts. "The Dracs make it all the way to Al Na'ir, millions dead and screw the Ares Conventions, and what are we doing? Sitting with our thumb up our ass, that's what. Wondering what the Dracs are up to . . . *I'll* tell you what they're up to! Consolidating their gains, that's what those damned Dracs are doing now! Deneb Algedi, Al Na'ir . . . Any fool can see they'll fan out next for Mashira, Telos IV . . . *Kervil!* So what are you people going to do about it?"

Ah, you people. Coleman cleared his throat. "Actually, the ball's in *your* court, General."

"Don't tell me my business! *I* know whose ball it is! This isn't tennis, son."

Not even his father called him son. "Well, seeing as how the Dracs have been quite thorough—"

"*Thorough?*" The word exploded from Magnusson-Talbot's mouth like a pistol shot. "For God's sake,

they destroyed a dome. I'll tell you what it is: *barbaric* .”

“And savage,” Coleman said. Actually, he'd been thinking *expedient* . In a clear-eyed, cynical way, the Dracs were models worthy of emulation. Obviously, they didn't want to spend their time quelling rebellions. So they'd killed as many people as possible in as spectacular *away* as possible. Pretty good way to make sure no one bothered you. Besides, domes were inherently indefensible. “The long and the short of it is we don't have the manpower. Our most experienced troops have been shuffled off to counter the Liao incursion and Falcon invasion. All we've got left are greenbacks, people who haven't fired a shot outside of a training range. Hardly battle-hardened.”

Magnusson-Talbot began rooting around her desk. “And your point?” she growled, fishing out a crumpled pack, knocking out a smoke, jamming it into her mouth, then flicking a match to life with her thumbnail. “You've got a point, right?” she repeated, squinting through a curl of blue smoke.

“Always.” Coleman inched back a discreet distance but knew that, by the end of the interview, he'd smell like a bar at three A .M., minus the booze. “But The Republic's fighting on many fronts. The Capellans on one side, the Falcons storming through IX and currently on Skye, and now the Dracs practically knocking on our front door. It's not exactly as if we have an overwhelming force at our disposal.”

Magnusson-Talbot snorted out twin streamers, like a dragon. “Don't remind me. We're up to our elbows in manure. No way I've got troops to spare, and the rest of the prefecture, hell, it's up for grabs. But I'll tell you one thing.” She sucked smoke, and then continued, words punctuated by tiny puffs. “Dieron, that's the key. That's where they're going, the sons of bitches.”

“But they won't stop there. *I* wouldn't. It's short-sighted. Yeah, sure, so you take back what you lost, but if you really want to cripple The Republic? Take Terra. *We're* to The Republic is what Luthien is to the Dracs. The best way to stop the Dracs is to keep *Dieron* from them. Do that, they'll flat out stop. They might even retreat.”

“You're dreaming, son. Still . . .” Magnusson-Talbot stroked her chin with her thumb, cigarette and its drooping tube of ash pinched between first and second finger. Then she took aim again, this time with the two fingers scissored around her smoke. “Good point,” she said, flicking the cigarette hard enough to knock off ash. “All right, we'll consolidate our forces along the border with Prefecture II. Wish we could do something for those poor souls in harm's way, but there's no help for it. I'll get word to Prefecture I about what's going on. See what they can do from their end. Maybe hack into the Dracs' flank from Dyev and Asta, cut our losses. Question is, will it work?”

“You want honesty or the party line?”

Magnusson-Talbot barked a wheezy laugh. “I want party line, I can spend time with any number of kiss-ass sycophants. Politicians're like fleas. By the time you know they've bit you, there's a damn feeding frenzy going on.”

“Okay,” said Coleman. “Then I think we're going to get our butts kicked.”

“Yeah, so do I.” Rising, Magnusson-Talbot stabbed out her cigarette. “You drink?” she asked, jetting smoke.

“When there's an occasion.”

“Son, there’s always an occasion.” The general tugged open a desk drawer, withdrew a bottle half full of amber liquid, and two crystal glasses. She splashed a liberal amount into each glass, handed one to Coleman.

The bourbon fumes were so strong Coleman’s eyes watered. “What shall we drink to?”

“Survival.”

“That’s it?”

“Hell, son.” Magnusson-Talbot knocked back her drink, inhaled against the burn through her teeth. “We survive? It’ll be a goddamned miracle.”

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Scarborough Manufacturers, Al Na’ir

Prefecture II, Republic of the Sphere

15 July 3135

Three days after Phoenix fell, Worridge had suited up and gone tramping through what remained of a city that had once been home to over thirty million souls: tangled skeins of steel and concrete poking at odd angles through a dense smog layer of sulfur dioxide and methane; sidewalks and sewers choked with the bodies of literally millions of animals and insects that crunched and squelched underfoot. And there were people: in mounds, struck down in mid-run, locked in a last embrace. The bloated corpses were rotting, green veins worming through skin and black purge fluid coursing from nose, mouth and ears.

Worridge didn’t know why she chose the park. Maybe she thought the park would be soothing. It wasn’t. The trees were denuded, the grass a desert brown, and the artery of a river that had flowed through the park’s heart was choked with a silver mat of dead fish.

That’s where she found them, at the river’s edge; a mother and daughter; the girl’s arms clasped around her mother’s neck and the mother hugging the child to her breast. The girl had blond curls matted flat with dried blood that had boiled out of the mother’s mouth. Mercifully, their eyes were closed. They lay on their sides atop a blue blanket. The remains of their last meal, sandwiches and, maybe, potato salad, had been reduced to a sludgy mess.

Now, Worridge pushed food around in her blue-and-white ceramic bowl before pinching a beet-red sliver of braised burdock between her chopsticks. Normally, she enjoyed *Kinpira-goba*, but the limp strip of vegetable resembled a piece of raw liver—no, no, more the rusted blood caked onto the girl’s head.

A voice, male, a little slurry around the edges: “Something bothering you, Worridge?”

She looked up to lock eyes with Sakamoto, who sat opposite across an expanse of low table loaded with dishes. Sakamoto always ate well the evening before a campaign, and tonight was no exception. A myriad of delicacies littered the table. He was chewing with gusto, and she was suddenly repulsed. Replacing the braised vegetable in her bowl, she laid her chopsticks on their rest and folded her hands in

her lap. “*Tai-shu*, I think the time is right for us . . . for you to discuss our future plans with the coordinator.”

“Bah,” said Sakamoto around rice. “We don’t have the time, Worridge. Even if I had the JumpShips to spare, by the time word reached Luthien and the coordinator devoted any energy to the task, The Republic could marshal its forces and mount an effective resistance. I won’t be hampered, waiting for word to dribble back.”

“Nevertheless, our duty . . .”

“Our duty,” said Sakamoto, with sudden energy, “is to restore glory to the Combine. That is the oath we’ve sworn, *Tai-sho*. What, having an attack of conscience?”

Worridge’s cheeks flamed. “If you mean, am I appalled at the extent of the destruction and loss of life we’ve dealt in pursuit of our glory . . . yes. It’s true that I did not grow up in a time of war and bloodshed, and until very recently, I was naive, if that makes any sense. It’s one thing to watch history on a holo vid; it’s another *tomake* history, and that’s what we’re doing now. But how will history judge us?”

“History’s written by winners, Worridge,” said Sakamoto. “And that’s us.”

So far. She opened her mouth to continue, but the door parted down the middle, and two corporals bustled in to remove dishes and set a tray of sweets before the warlord. She watched Sakamoto select a green-and-red sweet bean pastry shaped like a miniature lotus and pop it into his mouth.

“Excellent,” he said, his words a little gluey. He chewed, swallowed, groaned. “These are superb,” he said, fingering up an emerald green coil molded into a serpent.

One corporal said, “It’s the new pastry chef from Yance, *Tai-shu*. He said he’d thought he’d experiment.”

“Did he?” Sakamoto bit off the serpent’s head. “Bring him.”

“*Tai-shu*,” said Worridge, a little impatiently now, as the corporals left. How could the man gorge on sweets at a time like this, when they were about to embark on yet another attack wave—their fourth, who’d have thought they’d come this far—and still had not secured the coordinator’s blessing? “Before we . . .”

He silenced her with a cut of the hand. “We leave at first light. I intend to join forces en route to Saffel, and this time I’ll stretch my legs, and those of my ’Mech. Oh, and”—he pinched up another pastry—“I’m leaving the Fury survivors behind.”

She was startled. Sakamoto had executed all the Fury except for the swarthy *chu-sa* and a few of his comrades. Worridge supposed the *chu-sa* had cooperated in some way, but why leave them? “What for?”

“Expediency. I don’t want to drag prisoners around. And, really, where could they run? The only one we’ll take is that infernal old knight.”

“But . . . but they could signal . . .”

“Who? How? There’s no HPG here, and no one out there to hear. The only inhabitable spot on the

planet is Homai-Zaki, but we have forces there.”

“And if the Fury seeks reprisals, our *people* will be as vulnerable as . . .”

“I’ve made my decision, *Tai-sho* . Now” —Sakamoto picked up another sweet—“you must have some duty that awaits you somewhere.”

Surprise followed by rage bulleted through Worridge, and when she glanced down at her hands, she saw they were shaking. How *dare* he . . . ? *Patience. This isn’t the time. But soon; I have to do something about this madness* . . . Worridge folded her napkin and pushed up. Bowing, she left without another word.

Sakamoto waited until the door hissed shut, then jabbed a call button. “Bring me the Fury *chu-sa* .”

Fusilli was marched in five minutes later. Sakamoto waited until the guard had left. Then he said, “You’ll understand if I don’t invite you to join me for a drink.”

“Uh-hunh,” said Fusilli. His eyes were bloodshot; his normally swarthy skin peaked, and his clothes gave off a sour, rancid odor. After their first meeting, Sakamoto had made sure Fusilli suffered the same deprivations as the rest. With Magruder dead, the survivors would look to the highest-ranking officer for guidance and support.

Swirling the wine in his goblet, Sakamoto drank, smacked his lips, then said, “We leave tomorrow. You and your people will remain with the estimable Governor Tormark.”

“What?” Fusilli jerked out of his apathy. “What are you talking about? Our deal . . .”

“Our deal was your life in exchange for information. Your people would wonder why I took you hostage. The old knight, they’ll credit that, but a governor from a poisonous rock, and a measly *chu-sa* ? They’ll wonder why. But if you stay behind and your people show up . . .”

“That’s a hell of a lot of ifs.”

“Homai-Zaki’s occupation force will be skeletal. If Governor Tormark has an inch of intelligence, he will plot his return. On the other hand, if he’s your typical politician, then *you* will plot it *for* him, and be a hero. And if Katana Tormark is still alive . . .”

“I thought your men on Klathandu IV . . .”

Sakamoto talked over him. “Are very quiet. All I’ve got are rumors too bizarre to credit. So if she’s still alive, I need *you* *in her* camp. How better to restore you to her good graces than to stage a daring escape? Go one better: Tell her where to find that pottering fool, Eriksson. She’s weak as a kitten about that old man.”

“What if she doesn’t come after you?”

Sakamoto gave a smile that was almost beatific. “Katana Tormark will come. She’ll come, and then I’ll want you . . .” He broke off as the doors hissed open.

A man stepped into the room. He wore a chef’s uniform: white apron, white trousers and crewneck tee. The man was well built, with muscles that strained the sleeves of his tee and a broad torso that tapered in

a V to a thin waist and finely shaped thighs. The chef limped, favoring his right leg, and as he came to attention, Sakamoto spotted a most interesting scar, jagged as a lightning bolt, bisecting the outer third of the man's left eyebrow and licking down his cheek. "*Shujin* Jack Nanashi, Second Benjamin Regulars," he said, with a thick Cockney twang. "They said you . . ." He paused and his eyes, as icy gray as frosted pearls, slid to Fusilli, who was staring at the *shujin* with blatant curiosity.

"Speak freely," said Sakamoto. "You made these?"

"Them sweet cakes and such? Yes, sir."

"Well, they're excellent. Where are you from, *Shujin* Nanashi?"

"I came in on the wave from Yance, got me a little nicked." Nanashi fingered the scar knifing his eyebrow and cheek. "Weird, you ask me; who shoots a cook? Anyway, seems word spread about how's I can whip up a mean *Kushi-dango* and . . ."

"Indeed?" Saliva pooled in the floor of Sakamoto's mouth as he thought of skewers of steaming rice dumplings dipped in sweet, honey-colored sauce. "Tell me, can you make *Kuri-kinton*?"

"A few *Satsuma-imo*, some a them little sweet potatoes, and I promise, *Tai-shu*, that my *Kushi-dango*?" Nanashi grinned. "To die for."

Kafa Island, Batambu Chain, Deneb Algedi

Prefecture II, Republic of the Sphere

25 July 3135

There was this really old joke about Hell and Deneb Algedi. Seventh Legion of Vega Air Command *Chu-sa* Valerie Hines thought the punch line went something like blah-blah, blah-blah, and it's not the humidity; it's the heat. Or something like that. From where she sat, Command and Control in a Crow Scout helicopter, if Deneb Algedi had a hell, Kafa Island was certainly in the running: an immense, jagged volcanic caldera worn by time into ridges of coppery red basalt, hummocks of sand dunes, canyons gouged out of rock, and blistering heat intense enough to melt rubber. Just about the only things native to the island were those damn scaly nayaraptors, thick as mosquitoes come sunset, when they flocked out of their roosts to fish for Kafa gold tuna. The reptiles reminded Hines of bats; no, pterodactyls. Same shape, big teeth, curled talons, six-meter wingspan, wicked fast, blessedly nocturnal.

Midday now, fiery yellow sun high ahead, glare bright enough to blind, so they wouldn't have to worry about raptors. What they had to worry about was getting tagged by some trigger-happy planetary guard slinging an SRM, maybe, or an RPG.

And, of course, there was the sand; you couldn't forget about the damned killer sand. Hines cut her eyes right to her three o'clock and a blast crater that hadn't been there two weeks ago, and to the twisted hulk of the DropShip. The ship was a gutted, twisted skeleton of titanium and ferosteel lying in a scalloped trough of sand rimmed with a crust of flash-glass dyed rust red. Base camp was thirty klicks south of the crash site, but still, she'd heard the ship before she'd seen it: a guttering roar louder than the

scream of the sandstorm, followed by a dark hulk bulleting through pillows of swirling sand, orange flames shooting from the tail like a meteor. They'd felt the impact, too, a seismic shake and shudder that rattled Quonsets and vibrated bone. No survivors, and near as they could figure, the ship crashed because of sand, wind, heat—and really, really lousy luck.

Luck. Hines' lips compressed to a thin line. Yeah, right. Deneb Algedi was some kind of mutually exclusive thingamabob when it came to luck. First, the DropShip; then their 'Mechs, frozen in their tracks by scorching heat, one of those ironic oxymorons Hines could do without; intake valves on their people movers clogged with sand; and their infantry down to quarter-strength after getting cooked in their battlearmor. Oh, yeah, and then that one lonely little Republic JES II had made hamburger out of two *Lucifers* before the lead pilot plowed into the thing and set off the remaining missiles in its rack in a series of big and bigger: *bah-bah-BAH-BOOM*.

Finally, someone in Vegan Air Command wised up. Like, hey, don't we have, you know, a couple helicopters just kind of lying around, doing nothing? Hines and her guys had ponied right on up: a regular eagles' flight of six Donars and two Balac Strike VTOLs, and her running C2 in the Crow. Frigging about*time*: Her chopper jocks were pretty sick and tired of stewing in metal huts, swilling warm beer, and crapping out at five-card stud.

A crackle, then the pilot: "Ten o'clock."

The chopper's polarized windscreen was scored with hash marks left by blowing sand and Hines had to work before she spotted them; streamers of churning red sand heading for a cleft of deep gorge and winding arroyos.

"Roger that. Bring us around," she said, and then, as the pilot did a looping one eighty, she got on the horn to the lead Donar. "Mad Max Four, this is C2. Confirm contact, four Demon Mediums and two SM1s bearing twenty-five degrees west by northwest true."

"C2, copy that," the Mad Max Four pilot came back. "We are ten clicks from your position, angels three. They still heading for that canyon?"

"That's an affirmative. Give 'em another three, four minutes, and it's a cakewalk," said Hines, her voice jittering with the bump and skid of the Crow. Stupid strategy. Whoever was the brains behind the outfit, the guy leading that tank column, he'd just sacrificed his one advantage. There were ten commandments chopper pilots lived by, things like: He that leteth his tail rotor to snag the thorns shall surely kiss his sorry ass good-bye. But the big problem with helicopter assaults over open terrain boiled down to this: line of sight. Helicopters were terrific where there was dense ground cover, lousy when it came to wide open spaces because then copters got clobbered. But once those tanks got themselves boxed in by the gorge's high walls, they'd have nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. All her people had to do was watch their altitude and stay out of range of those SM1s; the rest was like popping tin cans with a pellet gun. "Mad Max Four, you are go for Charlie."

"Roger Charlie," the Mad Max Four pilot said, and then relayed the command to his strike force. "This is Mad Max Four to all units. Charlie, Charlie, Charlie."

Roger Charlie. Hines listened as the other pilots acknowledged the signal and then watched as the choppers slewed down into an attack wedge. *Go get 'em, boys. Rock and roll.*

Fifty-eighth Tank Battalion, Deneb Algedi Planetary Guard

Kafa Island, Batambu Chain, Deneb Algedi

Prefecture II, Republic of the Sphere

25 July 3135

They were the last ones into the gorge, and just in the nick of time. As his Demon rumbled onto what was left of the river, a rocky, sand-choked avenue that curled for twenty clicks before dropping into a scalloped depression that had once been a lake but was now solid red basalt, Major Frank McGinnis stood in the open tank hatch and heard the mosquito whine of a helicopter. *Right on time*. Spied the turquoise body of the Crow hovering way the hell up there. Figured the Crow for recon, cavalry right behind.

For the first time all day McGinnis thought that, all things considered, things were definitely looking up. Hotter 'n hell, of course. McGinnis wiped sweat from his face; sweat leaked down his back, soaking his desert camis. McGinnis' eyes skittered along the walls of the gorge, dun-colored strata of pulverized rock burped into the atmosphere, then silted down and compressed. Time and water had done the rest, knifing out a wedge before the planet's last millennial drought. But what interested McGinnis were the holes, a third of the way down, pocking the rock like Swiss cheese.

"Hold up, Clemens," he said into the open hatch, and in another second the tank jerked and squealed to a halt. Then McGinnis toggled his radio. "Tory Three, this is Tory One. All stop." He watched as the lead tank, one of their two SM1 destroyers, puffed to a stop and hovered there, riding a cushion of air. The rest of the tank column came to a halt, the effect like the ripple of a vibration down a taut string.

"Mac." It was Eberhardt, in the lead SM1. "You sure about this?"

"Yeah, absolutely." Actually, McGinnis wasn't sure about a damn thing, except if they didn't slow the Dracs down here, they'd all be grape jelly by nightfall. "Just remember to adjust your firing angle; didn't come all this way to get buried."

"From your mouth to God's ear," said Eberhardt. "Just say when."

"Roger that," said McGinnis and turned his attention back to the wide mouth of the gorge—and to the bulbous shapes of those red, whirring helicopters in their attack wedge. They were being smart about altitude; McGinnis read it in the way the copters' shadows went way the hell off to his left and out of sight. Yeah, coming in high and out of range, even from autocannon fire—if they'd had autocannon rounds. (They didn't.)

"On my mark," he said into the radio. He was waiting for the bump: that little jig up and down that dropped a copter's nose to bring missiles, lasers and machine guns to bear in an attack.

And the copters bumped.

McGinnis thumbed his mike. "Mark."

As her attack force screamed in, Hines saw the tanks open fire: searing red darts of laser fire and the lesser puffs and sparks of machine guns. No autocannon tracers and no missiles that she could see, and her boys were playing it smart, staying well out of range. Too perfect. Look at those Blues; they couldn't

even get their aim down, for crying out loud; they were that shook. Amused, she watched as lasers and bullets sprayed the arroyo's walls, blasting out a shower of debris—far short of her people. Idiots. Lucky if they didn't bury themselves, way they were shooting, and . . .

Later on, Hines wouldn't ever know what she'd have thought next. All she knew was, at that moment, something *black* ballooned from the rock. At first she thought, haze from exploding munitions, but the angle was wrong: growing out instead of up. And then the black grew and grew, and then roiled and billowed—and resolved into legs. Talons. Wings.

Oh, my . . . “Pull up! Max Four, do you read? Pull up, pull up, *pull up!*”

The nayaraptors didn't just fly out of the walls. They exploded, jetting out in a huge, chittering black cloud of spiked tails, needle teeth and razor-sharp claws.

“Cease fire!” McGinnis shouted, plugging one ear with his pinky. “*Ceasefire!*” The screams of the raptors were so shrill they grated like sharp nails squealing over a chalkboard. The hairs along his forearms and down the nape of his neck stood on end. He kept screaming for his people to cease fire because he wasn't sure anyone heard a damn thing over the din. But the shooting, from his end anyway, diminished to a few scattered *pock-pocks* of machine gun and a last hiss of laser.

And then he just stood there, mouth hanging open, shoulders slack—because McGinnis had never, ever seen a raptor flock take wing all at once. Hell, it was something that, if you lived on Deneb Algedi, you never hoped *to* see because if you did . . . well, you were probably dinner. The nayaraptors soared heavenward, streaming from the rock walls in black gouts like inky water—higher and higher until they found something plenty interesting to capture their attention.

And so, McGinnis thought, would the Dracs.

Picture the soot gray bulb of a paper wasps' nest, and what happens when you take a stick and knock it to the ground—and then multiply that by a factor of twenty. No, fifty. Make that a hundred fifty gazillion.

Hines had never seen anything like it, not even in nightmares. The air was alive with raptors swarming, coiling, boiling like thunderheads and bawling an unearthly, rasping screech that Hines heard *through* her helmet and all the way to her toes. Far below, she saw her choppers break off, cutting right and left to avoid the winged reptiles. But choppers were not like aerospace fighters; they didn't turn on a dime, and they sure as hell couldn't climb nearly as far or as fast.

Mad Max Four, the lead, was hit first. A raptor screaming straight up, levitating as if pulled to heaven by an unseen hand, slamming into the Balac just as the copter angled hard right, slewing down. Suddenly, there was a spray—no, *a fountain* of blood and chunks of quivering raptor meat spewing in a halo. The Balac bounced up as its rotors *whack-whack-whacked* the raptor, hacking off the head before gutting the reptile. A twisting tangle of intestines unraveled like a ball of yarn, and as what remained of the reptile caromed off the copter, the lumbering machine flipped over and fell like a stone.

“No!” Hines watched in horror as the VTOL smashed into a Donar that had angled directly into its path. The copters collided, exploded, showering debris and molten armor as a mushroom cloud of orange and yellow flame blew toward the sun.

Then the air turned electric, sizzling with spurts of laser fire crisscrossing from the remaining four choppers. They tagged a few raptors, scoring flesh from bone and burning troughs into bellies and along backs. But that only seemed to enrage the remaining animals, and they pivoted, screaming their ungodly howls, wreaking ruin.

“Get me down there, get us *down!*” Hines screamed at her pilot. She felt her stomach bottom out as the pilot pushed the Crow into a steep dive, and Hines fumbled with the pickle, flipping her HUD to targeting mode. The Crow had no missiles, and only one laser—but, by God, she’d be damned if she let this go by, she’d *bedamned!* Crimson spots that resolved into targets, so many she couldn’t count, jumped across her HUD, and she decided what the hell and started shooting.

She got two, and she thought that maybe she’d tagged a third. But then something huge and black wheeled into view on a collision course, filling the windscreen, and her pilot was screaming some awful, nameless horror, and Hines had a split second of life remaining to register this: Deneb Algedidid have a hell, after all.

A painting he’d seen once from way back when, really old—hell, *ancient* Terra. By a guy named Hieronymus Bosch, and called *Descent of the Damned*, or something like that; McGinnis wasn’t sure, and it really didn’t matter. Because as he watched a raptor wham into the tail rotor of the remaining Balac, saw the copter begin a horizontal pinwheel around and around as the main rotor twisted the chopper in a corkscrew before it blew itself apart, and as he saw the tiny blue Crow bullet like a meteor, the dance of its laser licking fire over the tangle of raptors and screaming metal, before smashing into a raptor, nose-first—he thought that, yeah, it was just like that: all those lost souls plummeting straight into the yawning mouth of an abyss blacker than a starless night. Not even a Drac deserved an end quite like that.

And what had it been for after all? McGinnis let his breath out, inhaled, tasted the oily, metallic smoke of spent fuel and charred flesh. First the Swordsworn, and now the Dracs. He had no illusions. The Dracs would prevail and Deneb Algedi would fall—maybe not today, or tomorrow, but soon. He’d bought this tiny slice of his world a few days, maybe, and not much more, and he was suddenly very, very tired.

McGinnis keyed his mike. “All right, people,” he said, and then stopped, shocked that his voice shook with something very close to grief. Turning aside, he met the eyes of his driver, read the horror there. McGinnis put a hand on the man’s shoulder and squeezed. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Cylene Nadir Jump Point

Prefecture III, Republic of the Sphere

25 July 3135

All that remained was to give the order. But Katana hesitated. She sensed Crawford and the Old Master, her JumpShip *stai-sa* and the bridge crew waiting on her command—and she couldn’t give it, not yet. Her mouth was dry as a dust bowl; her stomach was in knots; and she was prickly all over with

anxiety, about ready to jump out of her skin—all par for the course. All that adrenaline pumping through her veins was there for a reason, as were those inner voices insisting that living to see another day was nice, thank you very much. Similar to what McCain always said about doctoring: Death is an unacceptable side effect.

But was it death she feared? Katana stilled herself, reaching into that portion of her soul that commanded *zanshin*, watchful alertness. Yes, of course, she wanted to live. Why else would someone fight? No, she was more concerned about the lives she thrust into harm's way, and the soldiers she considered brothers and sisters under the skin, Sakamoto's troops.

And Sakamoto? A sigh nearly escaped. Crawford wanted to fight the man; no, that wasn't true. Crawford wanted Sakamoto dead. Understandable: Crawford had experienced Sakamoto's brutality.

And because of Sakamoto, Toni's dead. Tears pricked the back of her eyes, but she would not let them fall, not here. There was a time and place for grief, but this was neither. They would not strike at the warlord. They would try to reason with him.

And if the *tai-shu* was acting independently, for his own glory? Well, then—she crossed her arms over her chest—that didn't leave her much choice, did it? Whatever else, *that* ought to satisfy Crawford's thirst for revenge and, maybe, hers as well.

But she was not frightened. *Because when I know myself, I am one step closer to uitate: mastery of mind and sword, soul and body.*

Turning, she met the Old Master's gaze for a brief, wordless exchange. She wondered if he read the change in her eyes and thought that, likely, he could, though he held his peace as was his wont. Her gaze shifted to the communications officer, a smooth-skinned *sho-i* with clear, green eyes. "You're ready to go active as soon as we complete the jump?"

If the young ensign was nervous, she didn't show it. "*Hai, Tai-sho*. I have taken the liberty of assessing communications' capabilities between our JumpShip and our commanders stationed at Galatia III, Ronel and Hean."

Katana nearly smiled at the woman's eagerness; she could see that the *sho-i* was just busting at the seams to relay some good news for a change. "And?"

The *sho-i*'s eyes sparkled. "Receiving *and* transmitting, *Tai-sho*. The black boxes are working like a charm. Command Hean reports that boxes have been dispatched to Sirius and Irian."

"Excellent," Katana said, and she was rewarded with a grin from the *sho-i*, who squared her shoulders and settled into her task. She glanced at her ship's *stai-sa*. "Quinn?"

The grizzled captain gave a gruff nod. "Ready when you give the word, *Tai-sho*."

"Good. No unnecessary risks. Remember: in and out at Sadachbia." She raised her voice so that all could hear. "I know that we have fallen comrades there, and they deserve our respect and grief, but now is not the time. Do not linger, Quinn, understood?"

"Perfectly."

"Very well." Katana took a deep breath. "Jump."

JumpShip Eastern Moon, Sadachbia Nadir Jump Point

Prefecture III, Republic of the Sphere

25 July 3134

Tai-sa Orrin Sand stretched, yawned, gave himself a good, full-body, doggy shake. Going on two months of this detail, hanging around, waiting for something to happen . . . Sand scrubbed grit from his eyes. He was ready for some *serious* R&R. He understood why his duty included tag-team pony express runs, ferrying messages to and fro, or evacuating troops. But he didn't have to like it. Besides, all the shooting was over weeks ago and . . .

A shrill alarm spiked his ears and Sand winced, pulled out of his slouch in a hurry. "What?" he snapped at Con.

"Ship coming through! It's got to be an enemy ship, sir! There's no friendly scheduled for . . ."

Sand caught movement from the corner of his left eye and snapped his gaze back to the viewscreen. He saw the space at the jump point pucker, flash red, tear—and cough out a JumpShip, its long, slender body like the most delicate dragonfly, and so thin it was nearly invisible as it passed into *Eastern Moon*'s shadow.

"Report!" Sand cut his eyes to his communications officer. "Are they hailing?"

The *chu-i*'s eyes were huge. "Negative, sir! *Invader* - class! Designation . . ."

But whatever else the lieutenant was about to say, Sand would never know—because, in the next instant, space folded, puckered, became crimson all over again. Sand blinked, wanted to scream for the other ship to wait. Of course, it didn't.

Instead, the ship winked out. It jumped.



Kaffeli, Shinonoi

Prefecture II, Republic of the Sphere

15 August 3135

Rain spiked the ferroglass canopy of Viki Drexel's *Shockwave*, with a sound like seed corn drumming tin. Usually, she liked rain: liked curling up with a mug of tea and a good book. But tonight Drexel was nervy, her muscles taut as banjo strings. They'd come in on the night side of the planet and it was dark as pitch, the halogens dotting the perimeter of the defensive complex, Shinonoi's primary center, blurry with rain and mist. She couldn't see for shit, and she was worried, too. They'd come in at a pirate point, but surely Sakamoto's men must have known their DropShip was inbound for days already. And yet there'd been no reaction, and it was killing her. Wincing, she shrugged her shoulders and rolled her neck, listening to the crackle of her vertebrae. Her neurohelmet chafed her shoulders, her head felt flatter and a

sharp pain knifed up her spine between her shoulder blades. She let out a curse.

A voice, male, faintly amused, sorted itself out from the general background hiss. “Just say when, and I’m your man.”

Jing Smith, in his *Thunderbolt*. Her eyes ticked right, and she made out the fuzzy amber patch of his cockpit lights. The *Thunderbolt* was a good fifteen tons heavier, but Smith moved the ’Mech through its courses with the facility of a ballet dancer. Drexel’s lips worked in a smirk. “Sorry, but I’m taken, big guy.”

“Break my heart. What’s McCain got I don’t?”

“You really want an answer?”

“No. Here’s what I really wanna know—where’s the reception committee?”

“Wondering that myself.” Drexel flicked a glance to her HUD, saw nothing she hadn’t seen before—a whole lot of nothing. “They got to know we’re here, but my thermal imaging’s for the birds, and with all this steel, forget MR.”

“Leaving good, old-fashioned viz. I don’t like it.”

“Me neither, big guy.” Smith wasn’t big. At a stocky meter and three-quarters, Smith wasn’t tall, but he was solid muscle; a kickboxer in his pre-Brotherhood days, and a damned good one at that.

Drexel checked their distance and then called up a map of the complex from her DI’s database. “Still, no matter how you cut it, this is the best approach vector. This used to be an old lake bed, but The Republic filled it in, leveled it out, so it’s really nothing but a big old field. Hard to pull off an ambush with no cover.”

“Also hard to hide if they start lobbing LRMs.” Pause. Then: “I don’t like it.”

“You never like anything,” she said, though she’d stopped liking it on the way down, the moment they got close enough in their ’Mechs for her to see just what Sakamoto’s men had done. Blast craters, twisted girders and smashed cities—the planet looked like it’d been car-jacked then left in a gutter. As they moved in across the dried-up lake bed, the terrain had turned progressively more difficult to negotiate. Deep troughs cut out of the ground, hummocks of ruined vehicles, most of them identifiable as Blues by their insignia—and there were bodies, whole and in pieces, littering the route. She’d played her *Shockwave*’s headlamp over the bodies, working hard to keep her rage from boiling over. Those people had been dead a long time; months, probably. Working the ER on Junction, she’d learned a few things about bodies and decay. These people were way beyond bloat, and Shinonoi’s native animals and insects had been busy.

They were a bare four kilometers from the complex when Smith sang out, “Hey. Dead ahead. Twelve o’clock. You see that?”

“I see it,” said Drexel. She had, too, a split second before Smith’s warning: a shadowy, hulking blob that suddenly reared up between them and the complex, as if coalescing from threads of blackness, or—and this was crazy, she knew it was nuts—like a robed and horned devil rising from a pit. In the next instant, she knew something else. Her alarms hadn’t so much as burped. Throttling back, she came to a dead stop, then keyed for Smith. “Pull up. Just hold up a sec. You getting anything?”

Smith sounded just as mystified. “No target lock. Whoever he is, he’s not running hot.” Then, in an awed whisper: “*It’s aShiro.*”

Drexel’s stomach bottomed out, but a quick check of her HUD as her targeting crosshairs dropped into place confirmed. *AShiro* : one of the newest, deadliest heavy ’Mechs in the Combine’s arsenal. Four LRM-10s, two to each side of the torso, an autocannon wedded to its left arm; and the final touch—not a katana, but seven meters of *Hira Zukuri* blade, beveled along its cutting edge with a sawtoothed ridge along the *Shinogi-ji* and the tang affixed to the moral equivalent of a pike. But the *Shiro* hadn’t opened fire when it *could* have. Might this mean . . . ?

She made a decision. “Stand down. Take your targeting off-line, and drop back a couple six, seven meters.”

“What? He’ll read that for sure, and there’s no way, I’m not . . .”

“Just do it. If he opens up, there’s only one of him and two of us.”

“That we can see. Our sensors are for shit.”

He had a point. “I know that,” she said. “Listen, there’s no way he’ll be able to take us both. He opens up on me, you take him out. Simple as that. Do it.”

“Whatever you say.” Smith sounded unhappy. But he obeyed; out of the corner of her right eye, she saw the *Thunderbolt* backpedal until he was well back, out of her peripheral vision. “Okay, I just unzipped my fly. Now what?”

“We make nice.” She tongued sweat from her upper lip and tasted salt. Her stomach was doing flips. She was burning up from nerves; her systems weren’t even close to running hot. Drexel wished she was sure what she was about to do was the right thing. There were her orders, yeah, but there was self-preservation, too. Only the *Shiro* hadn’t made a move. They were close enough for Drexel to see through the rain. She picked out the *Shiro*’s pilot, his image fractured by rivulets of rainwater drizzling over the canopy. He sat still as a statue, as unmoving as his ’Mech and she squeezed out a small sigh of relief when she saw that the tip of the *Shiro*’s blade was aimed skyward. They were so close she was fairly certain that if the *Shiro* attacked, it would be with that sword and its legs, or the autocannon. They were evenly matched there, autocannon against autocannon, and neither one had an edge in missiles since they both sported LRMs. Plus, she had an ER large laser. Her adversary’s biggest advantage lay in the fact that he outweighed her by a good twenty-five tons. But the thing that still niggled at her brain? A new, top-of-the-line ’Mech like that cost a lot of money, and so, either there was someone in there whose family was very rich . . . *Or really important.*

Drexel hauled in a deep breath, let it fill her lungs, smelled the tang of metal and sweat. *Okay, and now we get to play chicken* . She said, “Listen, switch over to a general frequency. That way, he can hear us.”

“Oh, that’s bright. Want me to talk about all the reinforcements on the way?”

“Don’t be a smart-ass.” Then, without waiting for a reply, she thumbed over to a general frequency. She was winging it now; she’d had no orders about what to do if the bad guys didn’t shoot first. “This is *Chu-sa* Viki Drexel of Dragon’s Fury. We’d like to talk about . . .”

Her cockpit erupted with the clang of alarms. Stunned, she saw the *Shiro* suddenly flex its right and left arms, the tip of its blade and the bores of its autocannon taking aim. Smith yelled something into her ear, but she was already reacting, dropping into a crouch and spinning counterclockwise, bringing her autocannon to bear. “Don’t fire, Smith, don’t *fire!*” she shouted, and then she prayed she knew what the hell she was doing—and jammed her thumb down hard. A stuttering burst of armor-piercing rounds rocketed from her *Shockwave*’s right shoulder mount as the *Shiro* simultaneously returned fire.

The next few seconds were a blur. Smith was yelling; she was still screaming for him to hold his fire, *hold his fire!* She felt the flinching shiver that ran through her ’Mech and into her legs as the rounds left their chambers, and her ears caught the muted *boom-boom-boom* of her autocannon, the sound like faraway thunder rolling over mountains. Her eyes caught the stuttering flashes of autocannon tracer fire streak for the enemy ’Mech—wide of the target, precisely as she’d intended. In the next instant, tracer fire licked the space above her canopy, dazzling her eyes, but the slugs were too high, and there was only that one burst—with *no follow-up* .

They’d each had a shot. They’d each missed. Her mind flashed through the equation even as she was shouting for Smith to hold his fire; even as her targeting crosshairs dropped over the *Shiro*’s torso; even as her HUD lit up when the crosshairs turned red-gold; even as her thumb cocked, then hesitated over her pickle . . . she knew. The *Shiro*’s autocannon would’ve missed, even if she hadn’t dropped. The *Shiro*’s pilot had deliberately aimed above her head, and he’d known, somehow, that she would fire high. Carefully, she eased her autocannon to standby.

“Viki?” It was Smith, his voice ratcheted tight with anxiety. “Viki, you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Drexel sagged into her pilot’s couch, tension dribbling from her body like water from a leaky bucket. Her heart thudded in her chest, and she became aware again of how loud the rain was . . . and then she saw something else moving just beyond the *Shiro* . A quick check with her HUD confirmed: three SM1 tank destroyers.

Her lips went numb. The tanks must have been hidden, lying in wait to take them down if they came in fighting, and between the *Shiro* and the tanks and whatever else was out there, waiting, in the dark, they’d have been outnumbered from the start . . .

“I don’t understand,” Smith said. “Why haven’t they killed us?”

Before she could reply, there was a loud *click* and then a man’s voice, firm and authoritative. “Ah,” he said. “Let me explain that to you.”



Homai-Zaki Dome, Al Na’ir

Prefecture III, Republic of the Sphere

15 August 3135

“It was terrible.” Fusilli raised his streaming face, and Crawford read his pain. The man had lost a lot of weight; his torn and grimy uniform hung on his shoulders like empty rice sacks. A wonder that Fusilli was alive at all, come to think about it. “Wat . . . watching Magruder duh-duh-die like that . . . choking,

and . . . and then there was blood, there was so . . . so much *blood* .”

Katana put a hand on Fusilli’s shoulder. “There was nothing you could do, Wahab.”

Struggling for control, Fusilli drew in a shuddering breath, and Crawford felt a twist of sympathy. They’d winked in at the system’s jump point two weeks ago. There were no JumpShips to greet them, and although there’d been plenty of time for an intercept, their DropShip made the journey planetside without incident. When they were two days out from the planet, they’d received a message: not from Sakamoto’s troops, but from Governor Tormark, whose troops had retaken their city. They also held DCMS troops in custody—as well as survivors from Dragon’s Fury. Tormark had vowed to fight his second cousin; he would never surrender Homai-Zaki to invaders.

Katana’s reply had been swift, stern and compassionate: Fight and Tormark’s people would die. Surrender and they could expect help. “I mean what I say, Cousin. Your name will not protect you; our shared blood will not protect you, and your people have already suffered enough. So have mine. I hold you blameless thus far. Neither you nor your people, nor the people of Phoenix Dome, deserved what happened to you, and you have my sympathies. But harm my people, and I will reconsider.”

Tough talk, honest talk, and in the end, Tormark did the only prudent thing he could. He accepted her terms.

Crawford knew she’d meant every word. Phoenix Dome was utterly, completely dead, the dome little more than a blasted egg, and there were bodies—lots and lots of bodies, tens of millions wiped out in the blink of an eye. Eventually, perhaps, they would be cremated. But, for the time being, they lay, rotting: mute and horrible testament to Sakamoto’s savagery. Katana’s expression then had shifted from disbelief, to horror and finally, to naked fury.

It was the expression she wore now, staring down at Fusilli, the small muscles of her jaw bunching with rage at her impotence. Still, her voice was soft as she asked, “Why do you think they kept you alive?”

“I don’t know,” said Fusilli, and then; “No, that’s a lie. *Ido* know. Sakamoto wanted information about the Fury—our troop strengths, locations, intentions. Magruder wouldn’t give them up, and neither would I. I think he left me alive because he was counting on you to come after him. Word got back from Klathandu IV.”

Katana’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “And why would he think I’ll go further than here?”

“Because he’s counting on . . .” Fusilli trailed off, looked at his hands, and then blurted, “He’s got Sir Eriksson.”

“You know it’s a trap,” said Crawford. They were alone in an office adjoining Governor Tormark’s. The office was lavishly appointed, with a collection of antique paintings in gilt frames, a tan leather couch strewn with elegant gold-embroidered pillows and matching wing chairs. Katana stood, arms folded, looking out a bank of floor-to-ceiling windows that formed the eastern wall. The dome’s day and night cycles were precisely controlled, and the dome’s skin was shading to a twilight hue, the first streetlamps sputtering to life. Crawford ran a hand through his blazing red mane, and blew out in frustration. “Sakamoto must be stopped. Going to Saffel isn’t the way.”

Katana turned and her eyes were sparking. “Then tell me another plan, and I will do it. Tell me how to

have my vengeance, and I will listen. Explain to me how or why the coordinator would stand for the barbarism we've witnessed, and I will put aside my emotions. But you can't, and you know it."

"I agree. Sakamoto's gone rogue. But this isn't your fight."

"The coordinator has done nothing."

"Maybe he can't."

"I don't believe that."

"Then, believe this, Katana: You launch a strike against Sakamoto and he'll crush us. And for what? Dying for nothing is a fool's errand."

Some indefinable emotion chased across her features, but then Crawford saw a new hardness in Katana's eyes. "Listen to me, Andre. We are going to Saffel. Period. Even if the Ares Conventions were so much tissue paper, the blood of my fallen warriors screams for vengeance. They pledged their lives to me, and I to them. One way or the other, Sakamoto must die. You understand me? I would never stand against the coordinator, but Sakamoto is not my coordinator, and he must die!"

Her words hung in the silence that followed. Finally, Crawford broke it. "You know what you're saying."

"Absolutely." Katana pinned him with a look. "I want him dead, Andre."

Crawford nodded. "Yes. I thought you might."

DropShipBlack Wind,inbound for Saffel

Prefecture II, Republic of the Sphere

4 September 3135

Ah, how good to do battle again in his *No-Dachi*, standing tall and proud, with its gleaming five-ton katana flashing in Saffel's sun! Sakamoto lovingly fingered the raised ridges of his cooling vest. The fluid-filled cavities dimpled when he pressed down with a fingertip, and he inhaled the faintly astringent aroma of coolant. He'd been gone from the battlefield too long.

That was the problem with conducting a war on multiple fronts. Sakamoto took up a pastry, a tiny nest of honeyed walnuts in paper-thin dough, from a round silver salver. So many issues, and coordinating all these attack waves without HPGs! Frighteningly difficult. He popped the pastry into his mouth, chewed, then sighed as a burst of rich, buttery sweetness exploded on his tongue.

And how tedious, having to divert to Deneb Algedi instead of driving on toward Saffel with the advance troops. Nayaraptors! Who'd have imagined the Blues could be so resourceful? But that was all past now and, tomorrow morning, he would lead a contingent of his troops as a warlord should. Of course, there would be resistance on Saffel, unlike Al Na'ir, and the terrain would be difficult, half the land still locked

in ice. Besides, Bannson's men hadn't deserted the world and were fiercely defending a key defensive installation on the Dovejin ice cap. Well, *he* would deal with the Raiders; crush them, down to the last woman, the last man—finally, completely, irrevocably.

But then . . . there was *still* Katana Tormark. Sakamoto's mouth worked as if he'd bitten into something foul. Tormark, *always* Tormark! At last report, her accursed Fury had landed at Iwanji, south of the Raiders' base on the Dovejin ice cap. *How* had they come so far so fast? That the Fury had *known* where he'd strike next was never in doubt; that snake Fusilli would see to that. But *the speed* . . . Sakamoto chewed another pastry without tasting it. How had they done it? For that matter, *which* contingent battled his advance forces? Surely, Tormark *herself* wasn't leading them; her *BattleMaster* was nowhere to be seen. Otherwise, he'd have changed his plans and taken charge of Worridge's people at Iwanji and destroyed the girl himself.

"But how did you do it, you little witch?" Sakamoto asked the empty room. "What magic did you pull off this time?"

There was a discreet knock at his door. Startled, Sakamoto looked at the time and remembered what he'd ordered not a half hour ago. At his command, Sir Eriksson tottered in a half step ahead of his guard. "You wanted to see me," said Eriksson.

"Yes. Come! Sit, sit!" Sakamoto urged, shooing away the guard and adjusting an elegantly carved cherrywood straight-backed chair, lacquered with red chrysanthemums.

Drawing himself up, the old knight clasped one hand behind his back and steadied himself on his cane with the other. "I prefer to stand."

"Still playing the tough old soldier? Bah, your time's come and gone, Eriksson—though you're hard to kill, I'll grant you that."

"And what of it? The worst you can do is kill me once."

Sakamoto's dark eyes flashed with menace. "There are many things that make death pale by comparison."

"But you won't do any of them, Sakamoto, and you know why? Because I'm insurance. Because people will be willing to make concessions . . ."

Sakamoto broke in with an edgy laugh. "Is that what you think? That I worry *at all* about The Republic? Bah!" He aimed a forefinger at the knight. "Let me tell you something. You stay alive so long as it pleases me . . ."

"You mean, as long as I'm useful."

"As long as *I* decide!" Sakamoto shouted. His right hand shot out, cracking Eriksson's left cheek in an open-handed slap as loud as a pistol shot. The knight stumbled back; his cane hand went out from under him, and he crashed to the floor. Sakamoto was on him in a second, fisting Eriksson's lapels and twisting them tight. He brought his face an inch from Eriksson's. There was a smear of crimson leaking from the left side of the knight's mouth, and Eriksson's skin was pasty—not from fear, but pain, and this pleased Sakamoto *greatly*. "Where is your precious Republic *now*, eh? Where are the armadas to scatter my atoms across the vacuum? Nowhere to be seen, *old . . . man!* Look at you: used up, weak, *finished!* It would be child's play to wring your scrawny neck!"

“Then why don’t you?” Eriksson choked. “You keep . . . *bragging* about how mighty you are, how many of our worlds you’ve conquered . . .”

“They belong to *ME!*” Sakamoto roared, shaking Eriksson as if he were nothing more than bones stitched into a sack of skin. “Those are the Combine’s *byright!*”

“Don’t invoke . . . the Combine . . . like . . . some . . . *magicformula!*” Eriksson managed. Sakamoto didn’t just have him by the lapels now; his hands were around the old man’s throat. Eriksson’s voice thinned to a wheeze. “You . . . you said it . . . yourself, Sakamoto. This is . . . this is about *you* . . . this is . . . is . . .”

“*SILENCE!*” Sakamoto roared. He clamped his hands down hard, and Eriksson’s tortured breath rattled, then stopped completely. Sakamoto’s vision reddened until he could scarcely see the old man’s bulging eyes and gaping mouth; was barely aware of Eriksson’s fingers scrabbling feebly at the backs of his hands. No, he was burning up with rage, and he would *kill* this knight, he would squeeze the life out of him! He felt the brittle nub of Eriksson’s Adam’s apple and thought that maybe if he broke it, yes, that would be very pleasant, because then he’d step back and watch the old man die like a beached fish . . . “Old man,” he seethed, fists bunching, “*oldman!*”

What saved Eriksson’s life was not a sudden flash of conscience, or the old man’s resilience. What saved Eriksson’s life was the guard who, hearing the commotion, dared to find out what was going on. Sakamoto heard a click, saw the door sigh open and then the pale, frankly amazed face of the guard.

“*What are you staring at?!*” Panting with fury, Sakamoto flung Eriksson away and stepped back as the old man writhed, hands at his throat. “Did I *summon* you? *No* ? Then *get out!*” Then, after the guard had hastily withdrawn, Sakamoto threw a dark look at the prostrate knight, who was still trying to suck air into his lungs. “*Bah!*” Sakamoto said, and spat. His spittle arced through the air and splattered against Eriksson’s cheek. “You are not worth the energy.”

He stepped over Eriksson’s body, reached for his flagon, splashed wine into a waiting goblet and tossed it back with the satisfaction of a man having done thirsty work. “Get up,” Sakamoto said, his words lost as he drank deep. “Before I change my mind.”

Slowly, achingly slowly, Eriksson got to his feet an inch at a time, his words coming in tortured whispers. “You . . . you’ll . . . wish, wish . . . you’d . . . killed me.” A fit of coughing shook his frail body, and he bent over double, gagging.

Sakamoto’s eyes slitted like a watchful lizard’s. “You think? Well, I think *not* . . . for the time being. You’re a prize piece of bait, Eriksson, an irresistible fly.”

“For Katana?” The old man shook his head in a feeble negative. “She’s too . . . too smart for you. She’ll never . . . *never* . . .”

“Come?” His fury spent for the time being, Sakamoto dropped into a chair. “Wait and see, old man. She’ll come.” Suddenly, Sakamoto exhaled hugely, clapped his hands together, gave them a good scrub. He reached for a dainty puff pastry and said, conversationally, “I have a new chef, *Shujin* Nanashi. He’s quite talented. Do you know what he calls these? Inzanami’s Delight. Do you know who Inzanami is, Eriksson?”

“Hell,” Eriksson managed. “She’s the guardian of Hell.”

“Yes. Hell.” And then Sakamoto gave a lazy smile that would have been beatific if it hadn’t been so very awful. “And I bid you welcome,” he said, and ate.

DropShip Black Wind, inbound for Saffel

Prefecture II, Republic of the Sphere

4 August 3135

“What?” Still sleep-muddled, the MechWarrior, a loose-limbed man named Evans, squinted. The tan blob resolved into a Mech Tech, roughly his height and weight, in a wedge of inky shadow and hard to make out. On the other hand, it was ship’s night, his brain was muzzy; and his mouth tasted like the floor of a hovercar.

“My apologies, *Chu-i*,” the tech said, “but Jingo-san requested that you report to the ’Mech bay at once.”

“Jingo?” Yawning, Evans dug at a glaze of stubble along his right jowl. “He works day shift. What the hell’s he doing up?”

“Riding us, for one. He’s in a lather because the *tai-shu* will lead the drop.” The tech’s tone turned faintly pleading. “Look, if you don’t come, I’m going to catch it.”

“Mmmm.” Evans said, scrubbing the back of his head. He was the type of man who needed at least three full mugs of hot, black coffee to achieve consciousness. Sentience required five. Besides, he’d checked his *Panther* over a dozen times, and everything was—had been—fine. “What’s the problem?”

“We think it’s your DI interface. One of the drop couplings isn’t functioning properly, so we need to check the undocking sequence. Normally, we wouldn’t wake you”—a hasty, apologetic bow—“but since only *you* can access your computer, we . . .”

“You have your own passcodes. So does Jingo-san. What’s wrong with them?”

“Our passcodes won’t work. So we need you and . . .”

“Oh, all right,” Evans said, just to stop the man’s sniveling. Anyway, the fact that no one could access his DI was troubling. “Just let me throw on some clothes.”

Ten minutes later, they were in the DropShip’s bay. Evans’ ’Mech was rigid as a sentry in its couplings, the cockpit dark. The light tang of ’Mech coolant hung in the air, mingling with the sharper smell of scored metal. Evans frowned. “Where’s Jingo?”

The tech looked worried. “I don’t know.”

“Well, what the *hell* . . .”

“Look,” said the tech. “I can do the work, and if we get started that means we’ll both be closer to some shut-eye.”

“Fine, fine,” Evans cut in. He had a headache now, and his brain screamed for caffeine. Evans slouched into a lift; stepping in behind, the tech closed the cage with a clatter of metal joists and punched in his code. The lift rose with a slight lurch and a soft mechanical purr, its pulleys squalling thinly, and the bay deck fell away beneath them, darkening into shadow. At cockpit level, the lift bobbed to a halt. The tech pulled the cage aside and Evans tapped in his access code, pulled open his *Panther*’s hatch, and squirted through the narrow hatchway with comparative ease.

His cockpit, like most ’Mech cockpits, was configured to allow for maximum efficiency using minimal space. He duckwalked in, flicked on his ’Mech’s ignition switch, and flopped into his couch. As his systems flickered to life, Evans tugged his neurohelmet from a shelf just above and behind him, squared the bulky device on his head and thumbed on his gyro start-up control. He waited as the DI correlated data fed through his neurohelmet and verified that he was indeed Evans, then spoke the passcode he’d preprogrammed into the computer for voice match. When the DI agreed that he was indeed who he said he was, Evans punched up internal stats, studied the data as it appeared on his secondary viewing screen. Then he cursed. “You got me out for this? There’s nothing wrong with the couplings!”

“No?” the tech said, the word rising to an astonished question mark. “But twenty minutes ago . . .”

“Screw twenty minutes. Come on, see for yourself.” Evans heard the scrape of the tech’s boots over the *Panther*’s deck, a strange shuffling rustle like a cloth being snapped down, and just as he was about to screw his head around, his command couch jiggled as the tech came up behind and put a hand on his left shoulder. Evans gave the screen a backhanded wave. “See?”

“Why, yes, I do believe you’re right,” the tech said. Evans’ caffeine-starved brain only had a fraction of a second to register that the tech’s *stone* had changed: no question in it now, now it was—his gummy mind struggled for the word—*smooth*.

There was a blur of movement, something that flipped in and out of Evans’ vision so quickly that his brain never really registered the something as being there—and, suddenly, he felt the bite of wire around his neck, then the wire clamping down. Evans jerked, flopping like a hooked fish. Mouth gaping, tongue bulging, making awful gurgling sounds that got thinner and thinner until his mouth opened in a silent scream; he flailed, his legs dancing herky-jerky, trying to run somewhere, *anywhere*; his fingers scrabbled for the wire, searching for a way to get free, get air, he needed air, his lungs were on fire. Dimly, Evans felt his hands slick with hot blood; then his vision grayed, and his lungs were burning up, his lungs were going to explode, and my God, he had to get air, he needed air, air, he had to get . . .

“Not on the controls, please,” Jonathan said as the first spurt of bright red blood sprayed from the carotid artery, the left. Damn neurohelmet; he’d had to flip the garrote, not over the MechWarrior’s head, but from side to side before crossing his hands and pulling. Ah, well, couldn’t be helped . . . With a quick, expert flip, Jonathan simultaneously disengaged the pilot’s neurohelmet and jerked him from his couch, spilling him facedown onto a thick canvas tarp Jonathan had spread not twenty seconds ago. The DI responded with a steady shrill of an alarm at the loss of neurocontact. Jonathan ignored it. He planted his right knee in the small of Evans’ back and pushed while simultaneously pulling back harder. Evans reared, but Jonathan rode the man like a bucking bronco. The wire sliced through meat, and Evans’ blood gushed, turning the canvas a queer, dull copper. Evans lurched and flopped—and then the air in the small cabin was filled with the overripe stink of feces and the ammonia tang of urine.

Jonathan's nose crinkled. Death could be so messy. He'd debated: wire or knife? Both had their advantages, but strangulation was quiet, less likely to draw attention. Besides, the Thugee of Terra's ancient India had been correct: Strangulation really *was* the most intimate way to kill, *sosensual*. Later, maybe, he'd mentally replay this and properly *enjoy* it, maybe with a recording of one of those young ladies from Luthien as background, yes, that young black woman with tawny legs and breasts that . . .

He was so lost in this reverie that he was mildly surprised to look down and find the pilot gawping, wide-eyed. Evans' eyes were pocked with hemorrhage. He'd bitten down so hard that the last third of his tongue was held on to the rest by a shred of tissue. And his head was, well, unseated. Jonathan blinked, saw that the wire had cut through muscle and trachea, leaving the head tethered by the spinal column and little else. He relaxed, and the pilot's head flopped, then slid right on the bloody stump of his neck.

Jonathan silenced the still-shrilling alarm with a slap of the hand. The alarm had been earsplitting, but he'd pulled the cockpit hatch closed; no one around anyway, and he'd also had the foresight to send the lift back down. Stooping, Jonathan twitched the tarp over the pilot's body in a makeshift shroud. Then he reached left, unhooked a nylon mesh net designed to secure an emergency tool kit with room for a duffel. Jonathan knew from his weeks of listening to the MechTechs filing through the galley which MechWarriors carried an extra cooling vest. Evans was closest to Jonathan in build and weight. Bad luck for Evans; good for Jonathan. Yanking open the duffel, Jonathan extracted the extra vest, then cinched the bag, dragged out the tool kit, rolled Evans' body into its place. Then he replaced the kit, draped the duffel over the blood-stained tarp, and rehooked the net. Tight fit, but it'd do. No time to dump the body but later, when he had time and, more importantly, *space* . . .

Stripping down to boots, skivvies and skin, Jonathan shrugged into the cooling vest. The cockpit's air would stink awhile, but the 'Mech's air purification system would help clear it eventually. Most of the blood had missed the canopy, instead puddling along the left deck. Using the jumpsuit, Jonathan swabbed up blood before wedging the suit under the command couch.

In thirty minutes he'd wiped the neurocircuits, then reconfigured them to recognize his brain wave patterns and voice. What a bit of providence that he'd had so much practice bypassing computer security codes! Brothers, especially older, *crippled* brothers, could be quite fetishistic about security, but Jonathan was nothing if not an avid, quick study. All Marcus' secured accounts, chockful of little secrets, and lots and lots of cash. Lots. Jonathan'd had fun moving assets, setting up interesting dummy corporations, shadow beneficiaries: a paperless trail that would erase Marcus from the equation. If needed.

The pièce de résistance? Crawford. Why, the fool had practically *begged* him. "I want him *dead* ." Crawford had been crying; Jonathan could tell from his voice. "I want the son of a bitch *dead* ."

The fool had made the whole enterprise so easy. Killing was, after all, what Bounty Hunters did best. So, did Crawford want Fusilli dead because Fusilli might be a traitor? Or did he want Sakamoto dead because . . . well, just *because*? Who cared?

What a stroke of good luck little Toni Chinn had stepped into the role of doomed heroine. It had given Jonathan a chance to be oh-so-heroic; had made Crawford *trust* him. The hits he'd taken weren't as bad as he'd made them seem; he'd just wanted to block Crawford's line of sight so he could take Chinn down. *And I would have, simply for the pleasure of killing Katana's lover so she'd have only me . . . but that accursed fighter beat me to it.*

After he'd clambered into a wrecked fighter's cockpit—scooping out the body in clumps; talk about

mess—it was pretty easy to infiltrate Sakamoto's lines. Wounded, of course: That had *really hurt*, using one of his knives to slash his leg and scar his face, but appearances, appearances. The fool medic had swathed him in bandages, and once aboard a medical ship, Jonathan had switched identities. No one caught on: not the medic, not Dr. Montgomery, not the master sergeant for whom he'd fabricated an expedient fiction about his prowess as a chef (helpful that he *really did* know his way around a kitchen). And not a soul thought twice about the name, a dead giveaway: *Shujin Nanashi*. Sergeant No-Name.

His one regret? Dumping that green armor. *C'est la vie*; he'd buy a new set. For the time being, his 'Mech was safe and sound. Crawford was painfully gallant that way. Someone *might* hack the 'Mech's computers, but he thought not. He'd rigged several trapdoors and then a fail-safe that would fry the system if tripped, and then, *c'est la guerre*. But, in the meantime, Crawford would get his wish.

And then? On to his wonderful, lovely Katana Tormark.

Dovejin Ice Cap, Saffel

Prefecture II, Republic of the Sphere

5 September 3135

The glacier calved with a thunderous roar, a hundred meters of solid, ancient ice slewing off its moorings to crash into the sea. And it was like something subterranean opened up, as if some nightmare emerged from an age when giants roamed, because the *BattleMaster* came, rising from the east: huge, awful, terrible. At the sight, Corporal Jason Whistler felt his gut clench. The temperature outside his battlearmor was a balmy minus twenty C, the tail end of summer and the iceberg season on the Dovejin Ice Cap, but beads of sweat filmed his upper lip, and fear flooded his mouth with a bitter metallic taste, as if he'd chewed aspirin. The day was cloudless, the sky a clear, lapis blue hemmed by the deeper, almost cobalt ribbon of the Dovejin Sea, studded with jagged, white, ice mountains of bergs cleaved from the remorseless advance of continental glaciers. The sun-glare was so bright the ice pack glittered like a field of diamonds, and the reflection bouncing off the *BattleMaster* was so intense Whistler would've been sun-dazzled and blind if his polarized faceplate hadn't snapped to full. As their sled hurtled on its cushion of silent, compressed air, Whistler felt as if there was nothing at all beneath his feet or gripped in his armored hands: nothing but ice below and sea spread along the horizon—and Death straight on.

"Aw, Jesus." McClintock, on Whistler's left. "That thing is *huge*."

"Okay, stow it, fellas." A lieutenant—Whistler couldn't remember his name—snapped. "Not like you ain't never seen a 'Mech before."

McClintock was sweating so much he looked basted. "Nothing like *that* mother."

The lieutenant apparently decided not to debate the point. They were twelve in all, counting the lieutenant and driver: two to a charge, six charges. Their escort, four Bellona tanks and three SM1 Destroyers, was strung across the ice pack a good fifty meters ahead. The tanks were the best they had; hell, they were all they could spare. Whistler glanced over his shoulder. The base was two clicks away, off the glacier and on wind-scoured rock eroded by katabatic gusts from further inland. Beneath a shroud of black smoke, he saw sporadic seams of red laser fire, the crackling bright blue of PPC fire, the

'Mechs—a *DracHatchetman* duking it out with two MiningMechs, one retrofitted with a Gauss rifle, the other with autocannon and a rack of LRMs that were useless in close-up fighting. The refitted 'Mechs weren't doing well and, even at this distance, Whistler saw a glint of naked titanium flashing along a MiningMech's left knee. Raider infantry in battlearmor were in on the fight, milling around the legs of the enemy 'Mech like termites on a rotten, chewed-up log. Their pencil-thin streams of laser fire needled the 'Mech with about as much effectiveness as peashooters against a herd of rhinos and, in response, the *Hatchetman* reared back then slammed down one huge, armored foot—hard. Whistler swung his head back toward the *BattleMaster*, not because it was a better view. He just couldn't watch his buddies getting squashed to blood-jelly.

The Dracs' strategy was showy and pretty good. Anticipating defensive enemy fire, the *Hatchetman* had screamed from the sky, its lasers snap-firing before it even touched down just outside their base's defensive perimeter. But the *BattleMaster* had chosen to land five clicks away at the very edge of the ice shelf, believing—rightly—that the Raiders would have to spare precious men and materiel to head it off.

If they stayed true to form, the Dracs—the ones here and the others Whistler believed had to be headed their way—would level the base. The base wasn't big; maintaining it was outrageously expensive. But a base was a base, and when Bannson's Raiders stormed Saffel, this particular base had revealed a hidden advantage that Whistler would bet his bottom stone note the Dracs didn't know about.

Suddenly there were spurts of orange, like rapid-fire muzzle flash, and white puffs billowed on the *BattleMaster*'s left shoulder. There was a rush of white, something humming to his left, there and gone in an instant, the scream of six missiles catching up a second behind. One of the Destroyers swerved as geysers of ice and black smoke roared into the sky, exploding from the ice pack as if a series of long-dormant ice volcanoes had blown their stacks. The SM1 sped on, unharmed, and at first Whistler thought the *BattleMaster*'s aim had to be for shit; why the hell hadn't it cut loose with lasers, sliced through the tanks' skirts instead? Then Whistler thought, naw, the guy's waiting for his buddies, probably. Just having fun.

But their tanks didn't wait. At once, the air reverberated with the booms of autocannons and the clatter of machine guns. In response, their ice-sled skewed right, dropping back as the tanks shot forward, converging on the *BattleMaster*. Then, a tooth-rattling jolt, *abang*, and Whistler felt the sled stutter, cant, then wobble; and then the driver shouted on broadband: "I'm losing it, I'm losing it!"

The lieutenant screamed, "Hang on, hang . . . !"

A blinding flash, and then compressed air spilled from beneath the skirt. The sled whirled, tilted, pulling Whistler from his feet before slamming him down hard, and then they were spinning, the horizon a mad, dizzying whirl, and the sled was tipping; they were flipping over, out of control . . .

"Everybody offnow!" the lieutenant screamed, but what the centrifugal force of the spin hadn't done, the men did now, letting go, leaping free of the spinning sled. Whistler saw ice rushing toward his face, tucked, and *whammed* against the ice. His battlearmor absorbed the worst of it, and in another second he pulled up in a crouch; saw the sled bounce twice, three times before coming to a rest, upside down. Whistler was gulping air, and for another instant there was nothing but the harsh rattle of his breath. That, and the ice quivering: vibrations from the *BattleMaster* that shimmied up his legs and into his skull, and made the ice pack wobble like a block of gelatin.

"Everyone okay?" the lieutenant barked. Nods all around. "Okay, let's go, let's move, move, *move!*"

They fanned out over the ice.

DropShipBlack Wind

Dovejin Ice Cap, Saffel

5 September 3135

The night was bad and got worse as ship's dawn approached. He'd ordered the first drop—a *BattleMaster* and *Hatchetman*—ahead without him. Sakamoto gave no reasons; no one asked questions, and the only instruction the MechWarriors were given was to save the coup de grâce for Sakamoto. So, while Worridge led advance troops over Iwanji, and the *BattleMaster* and *Hatchetman* battled for the Raiders' base, Warlord Sakamoto puked his guts out.

After, he shivered uncontrollably, gooseflesh stippling his flesh, the room spinning whenever he moved his head a millimeter left or right. Mystified, his doctor suggested Sakamoto sit this one out. Then Sakamoto threatened to cut off his ears, and his doctor gave Sakamoto a shot to help with the nausea, wished him luck and beat a hasty retreat.

Every step was an effort. Sakamoto's legs were rubbery, and his head felt hollow, as if his brain had been sucked out through his feet. But he made it to the 'Mech bay where the others—Kyle in his *Locust*, and Evans in a bloodred *Panther*—waited. Once inside his *No-Dachi*'s cockpit, Sakamoto flopped back into his command couch and lay there, sucking air. His vision was getting fuzzy now, smearing at the edges like runny chalk on wet pavement. He toggled his ignition switch with a finger attached to an arm that was heavy as a lead weight. It took him a long time to attach all the medical monitors to his thighs and shoulders, and he fumbled with his coolant cable, working hard to jam the cable into the port on his command couch.

Somehow he prepped his *No-Dachi*: fitted the bulky neurohelmet over his head, brought his DI to life, toggled his weapons online, performed the mandatory sensor checks. But he was only half aware of what was happening; his brain was sludgy, and he felt as if he was skimming the surface of reality, making contact for brief intervals before bouncing away again.

Just as he finished the last systems' check and the bay cleared, a voice scratched in his ear: "Estimate optimal penetration in thirty-point-nine seconds, *Tai-shu*."

Sakamoto's throat worked in a dry swallow. "Very well," he said, though things were far from well. When this was over, he would sleep for a very long time. In the meantime—he shook himself, smelled vomit and sour sweat—there were Blues to kill.

"Commence battle drop," Sakamoto said, and watched as *Black Wind*'s hangar bay doors scrolled apart. The ice cap appeared: a glaze of white glittering against a background of cobalt blue sea stretching left to right as far as the eye could see. The docking clamps holding his *No-Dachi* in place opened. A jolt as the umbilicals connecting his 'Mech dropped away, and in the next second, the hangar bay passed before his eyes in a blur as Sakamoto fell to earth.

Carillan Sector, Iwanji, Saffel

5 September 3135

Wesley Parks was sweating blood and bullets. Their infantry was dead, slaughtered, and there wasn't really anything left between Parks and death; certainly no cavalry to come sweeping down the plain. And

that last spread of SRMs had come too damn close. To Parks' right, a stand of Saffel sycamores had exploded in a hail of splinters and black chunks of charred, smoking wood, like the leftovers of a bonfire.

At that moment, Parks decided, *fracthis*. This brothers-under-the-skin stuff was for the birds. He shot a quick glance out his canopy at the clearing just beyond the trees, but the view was the same: a swarm of Kuritan troopers, some in ivory battlearmor and others without. Some had SRM launchers and others were equipped with launchers for armor-piercing rockets. Too damn many; like ants boiling out of a kicked mound down there, and he couldn't slow them down fast enough. Worse, some had reflective armor; so, yeah, he could fry 'em, sure. He just couldn't vaporize them, and damn if he didn't hanker for one good roast. On top of that, he was nearly out of autocannon ammo. He had some missiles—fifteen, left rack—and they were great for distance, but lousy up close. And if one of those troopers lobbed a rocket into his missile rack . . . Parks didn't want to think about it.

And what about Sterling? Glancing out of his canopy, he caught the twinkle of laser fire spiking the unmistakable outline of a Kuritan *Shadow Cat* on a small rise about a half kilometer distance. No help there; J. Sterling and her *Ocelot* had plenty to keep them occupied.

Only one choice. Slamming his throttle, Parks urged his *Jupiter* into a backpedal. If he could get into the trees, there'd be obstacles in his way, sure, but the troopers couldn't get a clear shot either. His 'Mech responded with all the alacrity of a drunk—not surprising since he'd taken damage to his left upper-leg actuator. He heard the protesting squall of metal, and the temp skyrocketed as his DI chittered an alarm. Frac that, he saw it! Sweat-slicked, Parks pushed his hobbled *Jupiter*, throwing his weight back against his couch as if that would help propel him back even faster. "Come on, come on, you bastard," Parks grated through clenched teeth. "*Come on!*"

A bone-clattering *BOOM!* Parks' body slammed forward, his harness digging into his skin. For one dizzying instant he thought he'd been hit again, then realized that the shot came from behind—and it wasn't a shot. A quick glance at his status board showed that his DI wasn't happy, but what was new? And then he got it at the same instant he registered the splintering crunch of wood. His *Jupiter* had crashed against trees. No choice. Hauling back on his throttle, he powered through.

Then brought himself up short. Wood. Trees. And infantry, on foot, lugging armor and launchers.

"You're an idiot, Parks." Leveling his right PPC, aiming low, he swept the trees. The sizzling energy beam shredded through trunks, touching the wood with fire. As the Kuritans ducked, Parks brought trees crashing through understory; the air filled with the groan of wood, the crackle of flame and the startled cries of unarmored infantry tumbling back.

A voice in his helmet, almost frantic with urgency. "Parks, Parks, talk to me!"

Sterling, in her *Ocelot*. "Yeah, I'm here," said Parks, "in the woods, to your left."

"What's happening?"

"We're just having a little bonfire." Movement to his left, and he whirled, punching back a trio of troopers with a controlled burst of uranium-tipped slugs from his autocannon, trying to conserve his ammo. The hot metal battered trees and shredded the troopers, spun them in a dance that pulped their flesh and painted the leaves rust with blood. "And now I'm just about out of autocannon. I think I'll resort to harsh language next. What's your status?"

"Beat back that *Cat*. Lucky shot; sheared off its Gauss rifle right at the elbow. It's pretty dinged up, only

it jumped before I got a follow-up shot. But it'll be back and they're going to just keep on coming, Parks." Sterling sounded winded, at the limits of her endurance and, in the background, Parks heard the fizzle of shorted circuitry. "I don't know if . . ."

He cut her off. "You should get out of here."

Dead air. Then: "Screw that, Parks."

"Do you still have jump jets?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Then get out of here. I outrank you. That's an order."

Another pause. "Parks?"

"Yeah?"

"Up your exhaust. We stick together and . . ." Her voice cut out.

Parks waited a sec, checked, saw the humped shapes of troopers coming, and knew he didn't have much time to convince her. "Sterling?" No answer. "Sterling, you okay?"

Now she came back, her voice tight, fast. "Parks. Parks, look at . . ."

But he didn't need Sterling to spell it out. Ironic; he'd never really have seen it coming if he hadn't done a little reforestation. He'd have *felt* it—the last thing he ever felt, he bet—but he'd never have seen it: there, centered in a rough oblong of blue sky. A brilliant flash. The telltale streak of flame.

DropShip, closing fast.

Dovejin Ice Cap, Saffel

The scrubbers had done the best they could, but the *Panther*'s air was still clogged with the stink of old feces and clotted blood. Paltry annoyances. Jonathan was having the time of his life. After clearing the DropShip, they'd assumed formation to allow Sakamoto the honor of landing first, with the *Locust* and *Panther* on his left and right flanks, respectively. All in all, a glorious day for a drop: glittering ice edged on all sides by sea, in which smaller and more massive icebergs drifted, like mesas atop a featureless blue desert. The only clouds were black and oily, columns of smoke coming from the Raiders' base due north, and the drama unfolding on the ice shelf to his left, two-twenty true and about a klick from the shelf's edge: a *BattleMaster* hemmed on three sides by tanks; a crisscross of red and emerald lasers underscored by a sputtering flash of autocannon tracer fire; the *BattleMaster* clearly pulling its punches, abiding by orders to wait for Sakamoto's arrival.

Then Jonathan's gray eyes slitted. Something happening further inland . . . Intrigued, Jonathan nudged out a series of light, controlled bursts from his jump jets, correcting for his approach. The curve of Saffel's horizon flattened as he lost altitude and then the 'Mech slid right as a sudden howl of air rushed over his ferroglass canopy. He was aware of a squeal of metal, a slight creaking as winds driven from inland toward the sea by gravity pummeled the *Panther*. Gravity palmed his body, and he worked at pushing air in and out, but still relished the way the rumble of his jump jets swelled to merge with the roar of atmosphere. He was God, descending on a pillar of flame.

His eyes skipped to the ice field again. What the devil? . . . Oh, he *saw* the tanks; three Destroyers and three Bellonas pockmarked with ugly black scorches, like the splattered bodies of huge tarantulas, runny with molten armor. A smoking crater on one where a PPC bolt had cored away the turret—but *that* Bellona was still in the fight.

But then, there was the *fourth* Bellona, the one dropping back. That, and a flipped ice-sled, a spool of gray smoke canted seaward by wind. But still too high to . . . Reaching left, he flicked his infrared sensor active, studied his secondary viewing screen. Blinked.

Men.

Six pairs, twelve in all, in battlearmor. Inner Sphere standard, not Kuritan, and yes, he remembered now, the only scheduled infantry drop was for Iwanji, not here—and now! More heat, very intense, and Jonathan jerked his eyes from his infrared to the view beneath his canopy. Fire, spurting from the Bellona's flamer, licking the ice in a rough parabola back and forth as the wind snatched at the pillar of fire, now feeding it, now nearly guttering—and a good thirty meters *shy* of the Raiders troops.

Melting the ice. But why? How could that . . . ?

“Hey!” A shout in his helmet, loud enough to hurt: Kyle in the *Locust* . Momentarily disoriented, Jonathan was about to reply, when Kyle continued, nearly frantic, “Sakamoto-*san*, what's wrong? Can you hear me? Please respond!”

Jonathan had made only two mistakes his entire life. An infinitesimal error of such little consequence twenty years ago that he wouldn't discover the magnitude of his lapse for some time to come. Another, not long ago, but also small, negligible. But now, he made his third. As the frequency filled with the panicked gabble of Kyle trying to raise Sakamoto, and now from the DropShip wanting to know what was going on, Jonathan realized that he hadn't kept track of his dear warlord and that would *not do*. His eyes snapped from the men, and cut right, then down . . .

There, far below and directly over that blue sea: Sakamoto's *No-Dachi* . Not leading the charge but spinning on its back, arms and legs splayed, the sun glinting off its blade as the *No-Dachi* spun and tumbled—the dying points of a doomed star.

The job. Whistler was hot as hell, cooking from anxiety and exertion, even as pulverized ice showered over his armor. Whistler's tongue flicked to his upper lip, and his mouth filled with the taste of wet salt. He concentrated on the feel of the sonic drill, the peculiar *brrrrrr* of vibration he felt even through the armor. *The job, just do the job* . He was aware of the Bellona, glanced up once, saw the wall of fire, knew that the trough the tank was digging between them and the *BattleMaster* was widening and deepening, like a moat. Blinking away sweat, Whistler squinted at his depth gauge, read that the sonic drill had made it down thirty meters, and thought that, okay, this was pretty good. All he needed was ten, fifteen meters, and then they could load in the charge . . .

There was so much noise from the drills, and Whistler was so intent on the job, he didn't really hear McClintock at first—just a blat of sound that was and then wasn't. But then everyone was shouting, and then Whistler looked up, saw that they were all pointing up and east. Swinging his head up, Whistler saw the yellow-orange blasts from jump jets from two other 'Mechs, felt his stomach go cold—and then saw something else, in the east, above a shimmering wall of flame as the Bellona kept on, its pilot oblivious to

the 'Mechs falling from the sky . . .

And to the one hurtling toward the sea, fast as a meteor.

“Mother of God,” Whistler said.

Falling, tumbling, twisting, the 'Mech bulleted for the sea, hit—and shattered.

Carillan Sector, Iwanji, Saffel

“Damn you, Sterling, get out of here!” Parks throttled up, pushed his *Jupiter* into a lumbering trot. Not enough to outrun a DropShip, but that wasn't the point. If he could just clear the trees, he could lob his remaining LRMs, give Sterling a fighting chance and then . . .

A clot of troopers reared up at the grove's edge, just to his right, and instead of canting left, he lowered his *Jupiter*'s cockpit and charged. He saw the troopers flinch back in surprise, then settle to ready their shot just as he veered and crashed into a trio of sycamores the troopers had been using for cover. Hesitation—then the trees gave, falling away from his cockpit, torn earth and exposed roots sheeting over ferroglass; the roar grinding out the troopers' screams.

He was so busy looking right he forgot to look left. His alarms shrilled as an armor-piercing round bored into the rear housing of his left PPC, perilously close to his left rack. The impact made him stumble, and he came down hard on the weakened left leg actuator. No need for the DI's report; he felt the leg crumple, heard the grating of actuators. Parks screamed in fury as his *Jupiter* toppled like a felled tree. Desperate to avoid landing face-first, he twisted, threw the *Jupiter*'s right arm out to break his fall. To his horror, his autocannon barrels on that side snagged, then broke off under the punishing weight driving the *Jupiter* down, down . . .

A shrieking yelp that knifed his brain, and then Sterling's *Ocelot* sailed over the *Jupiter*'s canopy, both pulse lasers snap-firing. Her strategy came clear in an instant as the downed foliage and felled trees ignited in a roar of flame and black smoke that momentarily hid him from view.

Parks had no time to give his thanks. He was in the clear now, even if he was cantilevered, left rack useless unless he could get it turned around . . . Straining, knowing what he was about to do but doing it anyway, Parks rammed his *Jupiter*'s torso hard left. His heat scale rocketed into the red, and the DI bawled out a warning, then began countdown to auto-shutdown. “*Frac that!*” Parks roared. Moving at lightning speed, he punched in the heat lockout override code on his keypad, and then he kept pushing, pushing . . .

“Please,” he grunted, praying that his power wouldn't go, knowing he was going to die; this was so stupid, this was cockeyed, but it was the only way, *the only way!* “Please, please, *please!* . . .”

There was an unearthly scream, a shrill of metal as the *Jupiter*'s right elbow joint gearing sheared, buckled, snapped. Instantly, Parks was falling, his 'Mech crashing onto its back. He might even have blacked out for a second but no more than that. Now, blue sky overhead, then smoke, and then the DropShip looming closer, and then balls of gray smoke from some circuitry giving up the ghost, making his lungs seize . . . but no matter; the whole thing had taken no more than ten seconds and nothing mattered anymore because he still had power and there was this last thing he had to do.

Coughing, gagging, fighting for breath, Parks brought his targeting HUD up at the flick of a finger, acquired and touched off his last volley of fifteen missiles—at the precise instant that J. Sterling, probably

hoping to save his ass, jumped again.

Right into his line of fire.

“Sterling, no!” Parks screamed, horrified and—too late. “*NO!*”

Dovejin Ice Cap, Saffel

Sakamoto was gone, and it didn't matter because, as his *Panther* screamed from the sky, Jonathan understood everything in a sudden flash. His mind raced, working furiously as the ice field loomed. Once down, the *Locust* was faster but had no jump jets of its own; the disposable jets strapped to its undercarriage would be jettisoned as soon as it hit the ice. If Jonathan could maintain the advantage of surprise, he still might pull this off. But that *BattleMaster* was a brute, much heavier and with superior firepower; his *Panther* was no match for it, unless . . . Hands moving in a blur, Jonathan brought his targeting computer online. The active IFF transponder automatically blocked any ability to fire on a friendly 'Mech, but Jonathan saw what he was looking for. The *BattleMaster* still had short-range missiles. *All right*. He would have the advantage of surprise, if it came to that. Leaning forward, Jonathan brought his left fist down over the transponder controls. In instant later, his DI flashed that the transponder was off-line, no longer recognizing who was friend, or foe.

A pity it went on the fritz like that. His eyes clicked left, to the Raiders. *And how far have you gotten, have you managed . . .*

No time left to wonder. *Got to get down now, now!* Teeth bared, Jonathan powered down his jump jets as far as he dared. As he accelerated, the sky whirring by, his vision grayed and he grunted, forcing blood to his head, fighting to remain conscious. Jonathan honed his concentration into a single bright point as he bled altitude, gained speed, numbers blurring into a pulsing red datastream as the ice got closer and closer. *Got to time this just right, got to time it, steady, steady . . .*

“Now!” he shouted, banging his jets active. The *Panther* lurched, and his stomach catapulted to his throat before his body was smashed into his cushion by the force of his jump jets countering the machine's gravity-enhanced vertical acceleration. His vision swirled, and his head went hollow . . . A few more seconds of thrust and then he had to cut the jets, take his chances . . .

And then he ran out of distance and time. He killed the jump jets at the precise instant his 'Mech *slammed* the ice. The impact was so hard, the ice cratered with an ear-splitting roar that was loud as a bomb. Instantly, he was aware that his DI was screaming a warning as thirty-five tons of endosteel and myomer groaned under the strain, the force of his landing exhausting his *Panther*'s shock absorbers. His temperatures soared to the red.

“*Shutup!*” Jonathan hit the override rocker switch, silencing the alarms. In the next second, as his cockpit temperature spiked to the near side of broiling, he was already pivoting, putting the sea to his back and hitting his jets again, this time leapfrogging from the ice crater onto the hardpack. He throttled up, pumping his *Panther*'s legs, pistoning in a charge for the *BattleMaster*. A monitor glowed an angry crimson, and he saw the impact had damaged the comparatively lighter ceramic housing of his gyro, and he didn't need a computer to tell him that he'd also damaged the primary yoke assembly of the *Panther*'s right ankle.

If all I take away from this is a sprained ankle . . . Out of the corner of his right eye, Jonathan caught a glimpse of twin plumes of flame cutting out and knew that the *Locust* was down. He would deal with that later, if he even had to. First, he had to get further inland, closer to the *BattleMaster* and those tanks,

the SM1s now pummeling the 'Mech with autocannon in earnest, leaving jagged blossoms of fractured armor blooming along the *BattleMaster*'s right torso and leg while the three Bellonas nipped at the great machine's heels. In return, the *BattleMaster* pounded one Destroyer with four concentrated laser strikes. In a flash, the Destroyer's armor puddled along its right side, punching the craft into a counterclockwise spin. A spurt of smoke, and then a Bellona spat out missiles that bloomed along the *BattleMaster*'s right hip. Jonathan's external feed picked up the grating squall of endosteel as primary armor bled away, and the giant machine swayed.

By now Jonathan was nearly even with the *BattleMaster*, coming up on the right side, and instantly he straight-armed his PPC, cutting loose with a blast of supercharged energy. The crackling bolt, bluer than the sea just behind, chewed through the Destroyer's skirt, spilling its air, and the SM1 flipped once, twice, three times before Jonathan hit it again. A mushroom fire-cloud boiled skyward as autocannon ammo ignited, and the Destroyer blew apart.

The roar of the explosion nearly covered the others, but Jonathan heard them just the same because they were the ones he was waiting for: a rapid-fire, staccato *whumpwhumpwhumpwhumpwhumpwhump!* Not from behind, where the *Locust*, on its spindle-thin legs, was already sprinting for them; and not from the remaining tanks that were, even now, racing back for their base; but from his right, where the men had finished their work.

A voice, male, not Kyle in his *Locust* but the *BattleMaster*'s pilot: "What the . . . ?" The 'Mech's torso swiveled; Jonathan caught a glimpse of amber light, the stark silhouette of the MechWarrior, green shadows darkling over gray vest and bare skin. "Who . . . ?"

And then the first shock wave hit as the ice protested, groaned—and began to break away.

DropShipDragon's Pride

Carillon Sector, Iwanji, Saffel

The words hung in the air like ghosts and were so thoroughly stunning that *Tai-sho* Carol Worridge's brain clicked out for an instant. Sakamoto, *dead!* If she hadn't heard it with her own ears, listened as *Black Wind*'s pilot shouted out his report, she'd never have believed it.

She came back to herself and looked around the bridge. A decision; they were waiting for her to lead them in battle. Yes, a battle—but with whom?

A small voice that she recognized as conscience freed from tyranny: *Follow your heart. Follow your honor.*

And then suddenly everything fell into place, and she knew what she must do. She turned to the communications officer. "Open a channel. Get me our troops."

Carillon Sector, Iwanji, Saffel

"*STERLING!*" Parks bawled, and in the two years she'd known him, Sterling had never heard so much anguish in the man's voice as she did then. "*NO! Get out of the way, GET OUT OF THE WAY!*"

But she couldn't answer, didn't have time because she was twisting in midair, executing an aerial pirouette, twirling, the DropShip now behind and the missiles arrowing for her face. And then she did something Andre Crawford swore up and down ought to work, in theory. She brought all her lasers to

bear, aimed for an intersection point, and snap-fired them at once—and prayed like hell her armor was as good as the manufacturer said.

The laser fire coalesced into a fiery ball of ionization just as the missiles arrived. There was a tremendous blast as some but not all of the missiles detonated. A hail of raining armament boiled around her, and she was engulfed in a roiling ball of gas and fire. The flash was so bright her polarizing filters couldn't snap into place quickly enough. But it didn't matter. Her helmeted head snapped back, banging against her couch, and she was aware of a sensation of flying faster than a laser beam. She screamed—a long, drawn-out wail that cut out as her *Ocelot* crashed into the grove, snapping trees like twigs amid a tidal wave of sound.

Then she must have blacked out because, when she came to, she was looking through a veil of smoke from dying circuitry that burned her eyes. But she wasn't blind; no, there was no mercy for her here.

Because she saw the DropShip, still coming, well enough.

Dovejin Ice Cap, Saffel

Jonathan lumbered past the still-dazed and disoriented *BattleMaster*. Then time dilated and drew out, but not with the satisfying click that so often happened because, this time, Jonathan was the victim.

He was already past the *BattleMaster*, nearing the widening fissure in the ice, or so he imagined. The vast, nearly featureless white of the ice pack obliterated landmarks, made things seem infinitely far away. The ice was quaking more violently now, rippling and bucking like something come to life. Off-balance, the *Panther* swayed, and Jonathan instinctively moved to correct. The next shudder sent him pitching forward, coming down hard on his *Panther*'s right knee and outstretched right hand.

This probably saved his life because in the next instant missiles etched seams in the air directly over his canopy. The Bellonas were opening fire, and now the Destroyers got in on the act, punching out round after punishing round of autocannon fire at the Kuritan 'Mechs. The Raiders' infantry had done their job at the cost of their lives, and clearly the tanks were to ensure that no one, not even they, left the ice pack. Risking a glance over his shoulder, he saw the missiles streak for the *Locust*, detonate along one of those spindle-thin legs, and then the *Locust* was reeling.

His alarms screamed and, jerking round, Jonathan caught the flashing sputter of tracer fire. He threw up his left arm in a reflex, and the uranium-tipped rounds ripped into the *Panther*'s elbow, at the joint. He'd silenced his DI and hit the heat lockout override, but he knew the arm was severely damaged; the only saving grace was that his PPC was wedged to his right. But the muzzle of his weapon was jammed into the ice, useless to him, and he was out of time for fighting. No more mistakes, no more errors! Even as he heaved back, struggling to right himself, his mind was racing: *Have to get up, get up, get up!*

The chasm ahead was pulling away from the glacier, and doing so with a preternatural swiftness that was otherworldly: first a half meter, then two, now four. The violence of the ice's movement was so great the tiny forms of the troopers who'd planted their directed charges specifically to accomplish just this were jittering like insects on a hot skillet. Jonathan saw three hurtle into the yawning abyss; two more clung to the edges and were in shadow . . . Shadow? Yes, of course, he saw it now; the horizon shifting down, pushing up, the ice shelf where he stood calving away . . .

"Go, go, go!" he screamed, not to the *BattleMaster*, whose pilot now seemed to grasp what was happening; not to the *Locust*, limping badly now, his advantage of greater speed gone, his jump jets discarded. No, Jonathan screamed at himself to get moving, *move!* Desperately, he banged his PPC to

life; blazing hot energy puddled the entrapping ice, and he yanked free. Heaving his *Panther* to its feet, he threw out blasts of PPC fire in the tanks' general direction as a diversion, the bolts going wide, and Jonathan not caring, not thinking but pushing his *Panther* into a flat-out, lopsided run. He felt the jarring impact as a missile clipped his *Panther*'s already-injured left arm, smashing through armor at the left shoulder, and suddenly that arm was no longer functioning. The impact pushed him back, to the right, and for a heart-stopping instant, as the view from his cockpit was replaced with blue sky, he thought his 'Mech would crash to the ice to lie on its back, like a helpless, overturned beetle.

Then time ran out for all of them, every last one.

With a terrific, alien groan, the mammoth ice block sheared away from its anchoring glacier. What nature would have done in another five years, or ten, now occurred with weird, supernatural speed. The sounds were deafening and almost indescribable—a bellowing roar; a massive, throaty rumble like a volcano belching out flame and molten rock from a heart of fire. Violent shudders rocked the tanks and 'Mechs; two tanks too close to the brink simply teetered back and then vanished, one still spitting out laser fire that harmlessly punched the sea.

Jonathan felt himself falling—like being in a lift suddenly cut from its cable and going into freefall down an infinitely long shaft. His stomach lodged in the back of his throat; his head suddenly seemed to levitate away. With a scream, Jonathan hit his jump jets, hoping against hope that he wasn't too late.

Now there was the roar of his engines as superheated plasma rocketed out, each jet channeled through a venturi baffle, funneling power! A blurring rush of ice, jagged shadows along the sudden face of a cliff that hadn't been there five seconds ago, and now a glimpse of deadly blue water below; and Jonathan was blasting up, up, up! And something else now: piercing screams in his helmet; the other two MechWarriors trapped in their machines, going down, falling, hurtling toward death and a watery, dark grave—because neither had jump jets. And it wouldn't have mattered if they had.

Then, ahead, above, below, Jonathan saw white ice, running men and rage burned in his belly, roaring out of his mouth in a battle cry of pure, unadulterated fury! Try to kill *him*, try to beathim? Angling in, useless left arm hanging limp by his side, Jonathan aimed his jets, engulfing the troopers in concentrated balls of fire that instantly seared through their armor, charring the men black—and then Jonathan crashed down atop them, finishing off a last trooper who'd somehow escaped the ice and his fury with a single burst from his PPC.

Gulping air, body still shaking with adrenaline and rage, Jonathan turned—and saw the ice simply fall away. The screams in his helmet suddenly cut out, as if hacked by an unseen hatchet.

And then the ice, the tanks, and the 'Mechs were gone.

DropShip Amagi over Iwanji Airspace, Saffel

“Heavy fighting, *Tai-sho*.” The *Amagi*'s pilot was grim. “A DropShip as well. We will be atop it in seconds.”

“Oh, God.” Crawford, by her side, and when their eyes met, Katana read his thoughts: Too late.

Not after all we've been through, to have it end here, now . . . Two days ago they'd winked in at the same pirate point as Parks' JumpShip, and already knew that Parks had deployed his troops. Since then, they'd been racing to catch up, pulling as many g's as the crew could tolerate. They'd been lucky; they'd met no DCMS DropShips, had taken no fire—but if Parks and Sterling were dead as well . . .

She gave herself a mental shake. *Stop*. She wouldn't let her people die in vain, not without giving her all. *For now we see if Fate is with me, or against.*

She nodded at the pilot. "Open a channel. Broadband."

DropShipDragon's Pride

"I see it." Worridge felt the skin tighten over her skull. Another DropShip, and not one of theirs. She looked back over her shoulder at the weapons officer, a young *chu-i* with skin as white as porcelain. "Is it hot?"

She saw the woman's eyebrows fold into a frown. "*Ie*, they're . . . they're *not*," she said, a trace of wonder in her voice. She glanced up. "They will be within range in the next forty seconds. Shall I plot a solution?"

Dare I do this, dare I? . . . Worridge sucked in a breath and said, "Negative. Give the order: Cease all hostilities. I want . . ."

But she never had a chance to say what she wanted because then the communications officer's head jerked to attention. "*Tai-sho!* Incoming message, on all frequencies!" Then he gasped. "It's Katana Tormark!"

Worridge's breath left her lungs in an exhalation of surprise. "On speaker."

The communications officer moved to comply. For a brief instant—the space between one beat of Worridge's heart and the next—all she heard was the faint sputter of solar background interference. But then the strong, confident tones of a woman she'd never met but about whom she knew much filled the bridge.

"This is Katana Tormark, *Tai-sho* of Dragon's Fury. I would speak with you, *Tai-shu* Sakamoto. On your orders, you have carved a path of destruction from Shimonita to Dabih, from Piedmont to Al Na'ir. You have attacked my forces and killed my people—and yet I do not come for revenge. What your troops did was their duty; what they did, they did believing in your honor and in the Dragon. But there is no honor in brother fighting brother. We are not your enemies. What we have seized we have claimed in the name of the coordinator. We would join you, gladly, but your attacks on our people must cease, and we must discuss how this war will be waged. There is no honor in slaughter, and we would fight you with a heavy heart. But we *will* fight—and we will die if we must but as *warriors*, not savages."

A pause, then: "We would have your answer."

Silence.

Worridge's eyes met the pilot's; she read . . . what? Admiration? Resolve? Then the pilot moved his head—not much, not enough for anyone who wasn't watching closely to pick it up—but he gave an infinitesimal, a fractional nod.

Yes, she knew what she had to do next. *And about frigging time*. She nodded at the comm officer. "Let us speak. And make sure *everyone* hears."

Carillon Field, Iwanji, Saffel

Well, so she wasn't dead. And neither was Parks, though he ought to be, the lummoX. She still saw smoke and blue sky, but the DropShip had angled away. Her throat was raw; she'd be black-and-blue tomorrow; her *Ocelot* might never recover. And she'd for sure need a new cooling vest; there was dripping coolant everywhere. But there was nothing wrong with her eyes or ears, and she heard the same wonder in Parks' voice as she felt herself.

"Sterling," he said, hacking, "you hearing this?"

"I hear it." Sterling backhanded sweat, blood and grime from her neck. "I just can't fraccing believe it."

DropShip Amagi

Katana was stunned. Sakamoto was dead. And now . . . She felt Crawford at her elbow. "You can end this," he murmured. "*Now*."

"*Hai*. I can." She squared her shoulders. "And I will." She looked a question to her comm officer, and the woman nodded. Heart slamming against her ribs, Katana forced the tremor from her voice: "*Tai-sho* Worrige, you have my deepest sympathies. I would regret fighting you now, or in the future. If you would have me, I would be honored to join you—but *only* for the Dragon. If not, we will withdraw and battle you another day."

A long pause. Katana tried to still her mind, knowing that her weapons officer would warn her if they were being led into a trap. But her officer remained silent, and then Worrige was back: "*Ie*. You would honorus *Tai-sho*. We await your orders." Another pause, then: "What would you have us do?"

Crawford's gasp was audible, but Katana barely heard it over the sudden thundering of her pulse. Worrige, ceding command? *Toher*? This wasn't possible; how could . . . ?

Confused, she turned to Crawford. A slow smile spread on his lips until he was grinning from ear to ear. "Well," he said, and very nearly smirked, "you heard the lady. What would you have us do, my *Tai-sho*?"

No hesitation now; she felt her resolve firm, nodded at her comm. "I am honored, *Tai-sho* Worrige. We will attack. There's a planet to take, after all."

Yet the next voice Katana heard was not Worrige. It was a man, and there was no mistaking its ring of total authority: "Don't you think you'd better consult with me first?"

Dovejin Ice Cap, Saffel

The Raiders' infantry had scattered, spilling onto an icy waste that would surely claim them. The MiningMechs were so much smoking rubble, and Jonathan thought those missiles well spent. For now, he swayed forward, his bad right ankle and all but useless left arm canceling one another out. Toggling his PPC, Jonathan swept a blue trough of destruction while the *Hatchetman* smashed other buildings to rubble. In a day the Raiders' battlearmor power packs would be exhausted, and they'd have no base to return to. So, they'd freeze. A mercy, probably. Dying of thirst was so unpleasant.

Then Jonathan stopped, listened to Worrige, then Katana—and then that man, a voice he knew . . .

"My God!" It was the *Hatchetman*'s pilot. "That's Theodore Kurita!"

“Well, what do you know?” Jonathan said. A quick flick of his eyes told him his IFF was still, sadly, on the fritz. Pivoting, he brought his missiles to bear.

“Just in the nick of time,” he said, and fired.

Imperial City, Luthien

Pesht Military District, Draconis Combine

30 November 3135

Well? Katana thought as she stood in the massive, silent hall. *Now* what? She turned in a slow circle, taking in the immense space of the Throne Room, acutely aware of the way her clothes rustled, the slight scuff of her feet against polished hardwood and her eyes kept returning to the Dragon Throne upon its dais: a powerful presence even in the absence of the coordinator. She'd seen the throne in a documentary done back in thirty-three as part of a series called *Touring the Stars*. Now, staring up at those swirling dragons and the mural immediately behind, Katana was awed to immobility.

A voice, just behind her: “Beautiful, isn't it?”

Startled, Katana turned, gawped, then blinked. He'd come up on soundless, stockinged feet: Vincent Kurita in the flesh, resplendent in a kimono of peacock blue with chrysanthemums and five-clawed dragons done in gold embroidery and bound at the waist with a gold obi sash. Hastily, she bowed. “Forgive me, *Tono*. I was unaware of your presence.”

“Oh, but you were,” said Kurita. He had a pleasing voice, soft and full, and his hazel eyes were clear. Kurita gestured at the throne and the dragon mural just behind. “When you gaze upon the Combine, you look upon us. To be aware of the vastness of the Combine is to open your mind to the corners of the known universe we inhabit and those we have yet to conquer. But,” he said, laugh lines appearing at the corners of his eyes, “we asked whether you thought it was beautiful.”

“*Hai*,” Katana said, without hesitation. “Beautiful when it was made, *Tono*. But more beautiful now.”

“Ah?” Kurita's coal black eyebrows arched. “And how so?”

Katana gestured at the mural. “The worlds the Combine lost when The Republic was born have been returned. What *Tai-sho* Sakamoto began, your son ended. Saffel has been conquered, as have Styx, Athenry and Pike IV.” She paused, thinking back to the campaign in which she, Worridge and Theodore Kurita had fought side by side before Kurita had called a halt shy of Dieron, a move she'd opposed, and demanded her swords. She eyed the coordinator. *Well, and if he hears this as criticism, so be it.* “But the Combine isn't complete, not yet. Dieron waits on its coordinator.”

“Ah. And what about *you*?”

“I have no regrets. What I did, I did for the Dragon.”

“Without our consent.”

“Or dissent. I acted on your silence.”

“Indeed,” said Kurita, and his benevolent manner stirred something long forgotten in her mind: sitting with her father as he told stories about The Republic or, better yet, how he’d met her mother. “Then we have fulfilled our duties well.”

Katana frowned. “*Tono?*”

“You forget that a coordinator is the null space within the wheel. Without a hub, there is no wheel. The Combine turns, but it does so firmly anchored to the gap that is our silence. Do you think we have neither eyes nor ears? Of course we followed your course; we were heartened when you stood for your Dragon’s Fury, and more so when you declared for our cause. Once we divined Sakamoto’s true intent, we made sure that our heir was behind him at nearly every step. So, do you truly believe that our heir would’ve let you live without our consent?”

“*Ie, Tono*,” said Katana, but she was confused and this upset her. Hadn’t this been precisely what she’d been working for over these many months? And yet, Katana understood now that the coordinator had never been asleep; the coordinator was the unseen master pulling the strings of his many puppets. “So you tasked me.”

“And you did not disappoint. Else . . .” Kurita let his voice trail away, leaving the threat unspoken: *Else we would have had your head* .

“I am not my father’s daughter, and would never desert the Combine.”

“Really?” Kurita’s eyebrows wriggled in a display of mischief that was reflected by the sudden sparkle in his eyes. “You were governor, duchess, prefect. So many Republican honors the Combine never sanctioned. And as for your father, do not deceive yourself that he acted without the coordinator’s consent.”

“Consent? My father lost everything. He turned his back on the Combine. He was a governor!”

“So? Despite your trappings, you never lost the honor that resides in the heart, and whatever else your father lost, he was never stripped of his.”

Why they were talking about her father *at all* was a mystery. “I still have my honor, *Tono* , and am ready for whatever my Coordinator wishes. Command me. If you wish my death for my disobedience, I only ask to choose my *kaishakunin* so that I may be sure he will strike cleanly.”

For a moment, the coordinator’s face was deathly still, and she steeled herself, only hoping that the Old Master struck well. An irony, that: that her father should have been *kaishakunin* to the man whose brother would behead the father’s daughter.

Then she saw a change come over the coordinator’s features. His mouth twitched. His eyes narrowed. And then he laughed: a rich, warm, full-throated bellow that was astonishing, if only because, a few seconds before, Katana was convinced she would die.

“Katana Tormark.” Tears of mirth squeezed from the corners of the coordinator’s eyes, and he wiped them away with both thumbs. “If we’d wanted you dead, you’d be dead already.” Kurita broke off,

flipped open the case of his finger watch and tut-tutted. “Look at the time. How late it is!”

He clapped three times. Instantly, *ashoji* slid open and two palace guards appeared. Spying them, Katana’s legs went a little numb. She didn’t know why she felt surprise; clearly, disarming her had been the coordinator’s plan. Now, they’d take her into custody, to prison and then . . .

What the coordinator said next stunned her to the core. “Show our guest to her rooms. She will want to bathe and rest after her long travail. Treat her with courtesy for she is an honored guest and our new warlord—of the *Dieron* Military District.”

The coordinator gave her an expectant look. But, at first, Katana just stared, unable to comprehend what Kurita meant. Then a surge of astonishment swept her from tip to toe, and suddenly, everything came clear: the coordinator’s allowing Sakamoto to show his true colors; the latitude he’d given her to demonstrate where she stood. But this last, what could it mean? Wasn’t it far more, well, *expedient* to name her as Benjamin’s *Tai-shu*? Then, in the next instant, she saw why Kurita could not.

Because there are the other warlords; they’d never stomach this, and besides, they’d get the wrong idea: that knocking each other off is how you rise in the ranks. But giving me Dieron means he’s still testing me, seeing if I can pull this off. . .

She saw that Kurita was still waiting, and the wordless look they exchanged told her: He knew her thoughts, and she was correct. She finally said, “*Tono*, I . . . I don’t know what to say . . .”

“*Yes* would be a start. There is work still to be done, Katana, and we do hate loose ends. And *Tai-shu* Tormark”—Vincent’s features creased in a smile—“we dine at eight.”

Epilogue

Katana’s Journal

15 January 3136

Andre said take a vacation. Right. I’ve been so busy planning for our next offensive I haven’t changed my socks. And Mizunami? That’s in the Pesht District, hell and gone. But then I’m staring at a holovid, and the coordinator’s ordering me to go. Well, you know, what can you say?

Andre suggested this out-of-the-way place. Five-Waters, because of the rivers that converge there to form the great Okuninoshi: twice as wide and three times as long as the Amazon on Terra. That’s a lot of river. The path we took—Andre and I in the lead, the Old Master trailing a meter behind—meandered along the shore through fragrant river grasses. Clouds of iridescent blue butterflies danced over fields of tiny white blossoms. Giant Mizunami cypress with beards of gray-green moss hugged the riverbank, and the water was so clear and clean I could see a mosaic of multicolored pebbles, and silver fish undulating between roots as thick as my leg.

Okay. It was pretty. But why would the *coordinator* . . . ? Then it hit me. I turned to Andre. “*You* set this up.”

“My lips are sealed.” And then Andre grinned like a little kid who’s shorted your sheets. You’d think being promoted *totai-sho* and my right-hand man would’ve brought him down a notch. He lifted his chin at a small rise a klick away. “Over that hill.”

I was ready to rip out his tonsils but settled for grumbling and nasty looks. But it wasn't until we mounted that rise and I saw the house that I started to get an inkling that something was *really* up. Wasn't the house so much; nothing more than a few airy rooms with a covered porch wider than an *engawa* and *shojis* open to the breeze. A white gravel path led to three wooden steps in front of the house; at the back, I saw another curl of gravel, this one winding to a garden of Japanese cedar, Keyaki and ground cypress. We took that meandering path through willowy green bamboo—and then I saw it: a cone of light. An old man sitting on a crag of black stone; back turned, a long shock of snow-white hair. Sunning the same, lazy way a lizard warms itself on a rock. The rock perched at the edge of a *Katesansui*; you could immediately tell that whoever tended this stone garden took great care, raking patterns to represent ocean waves crashing against the shores of rock islands haloed with azaleas and deep green moss. Our footfalls made a sound like eggshells fracturing, and the old man turned.

Even now, though it is very late and the flame from my candle threatens to drown in hot wax, I remember that moment, that eerie frisson of something very close to fear. Tripping over a secret hope? A desire? I don't know. That old man's face was pruned by wrinkles, and age had bent his back so that he seemed to fold in two, but *Iknew* . . . and somehow, finally, I managed a single word: "Father?"

He tottered to his feet. He was very thin, his limbs no thicker than twigs, and his fingers were gnarled by age and long use. Still, he was a warrior; you could tell from the way he held himself. "*Gashi, Musume*," he said, in a voice still surprisingly rich.

I didn't scream. I didn't faint. I didn't melt into his arms, everything forgiven and forgotten. At first, I felt nothing but a curious, unpleasant numbness; then heat seeped through my veins but—how strange—my fingers and hands and lips were icy with shock. I just . . . *stood* there until Andre whispered in my ear. "Go to him, Katana."

But instead I turned on Andre, and he read my face. "You can be angry at me if you wish, Katana. But whatever else your father did or was, he was an agent of the O5P and a noble, courageous man. *I* am O5P, and this much is certain: We do not forget our own—and we were always watching. Even in your darkest hour, we were always there."

Always there . . . I didn't understand that *then*. But I *do* now. The coordinator was always watching, *always*. I was never far from his reach as he worked through the Keeper and then through the Keeper's agents, through Andre and countless others. Never far at all.

So I did what Andre said. I went to my father. I bowed with the reverence and respect the elderly deserve. And I said, "I'm not sorry for my beliefs, Father. At the time, I made my choices as you made yours. I don't know how I'll feel about *my* choices when I'm old. But I think that *you* were wrong."

Not exactly a daughterly rapprochement. Maybe that was the only type of closeness I could allow. But my father didn't bite. "Perhaps," he said. "But who cares? My time is over. You are the future. So, come. Sit and tell me of your life."

So I did. I talked about . . . well, everything. He listened. I don't know when Andre left, but when we rose to have our first meal together in so many years, Andre was gone. But the Old Master remained, and he's here now, standing outside my room, even though it's late and the moon is high and crickets make their music. Somewhere the river slides by, a changeless ribbon of silver that is forever, like time and memory.

Tomorrow, or the next day, I'll have to leave because a warlord's work is never done and I have a

campaign to plan. Out there, somewhere, are my enemies: men like Bhatia, who would see me fail and the Tormark name forever erased from history, and there's probably another Sakamoto waiting his turn. But there are my people, the brothers and sisters of my Dragon's Fury, and the wider family of the Combine I have yet to know. There are the spirits I will mourn: my mother, my fallen comrades, the innocents Sakamoto slaughtered. And Toni: ah, I wish you'd lived to see this.

Tomorrow, perhaps, I will seek out a Shinto priest and make an offering of thanks and gratitude to the *kami*. Yes, perhaps tomorrow.

But for now, I am content. For now, I'm home.

Imperial City, Luthien

Pesht Military District, Draconis Combine

30 January 3136

He had a tantrum, flinging food like a three-year-old. Miko did her best, but Bhatia finally sent her away because he really *wasn't* in the mood. Galling; bad enough to lose out to a Tormark, but to be unable to function as *aman* . . .

Katana Tormark, *atai-shu*! Unbelievable; she must've slept with Theodore. *Certainly would suit the coordinator; Theodore must produce an heir. What does that Peacock care where his son plants his seed so long as the line continues?* Irritably, Bhatia backhanded that little bitch's latest decree: that those damnably loyal *yakuza* rank among the most honorable of the Combine's citizens, that they be *promoted* within the DCMS!

Bhatia paced. Best to focus, perhaps, on what he'd gained. Sakamoto was dead, a big plus because *he* couldn't be implicated in directly supporting the idiot's campaign. And Wahab Fusilli; yes, back in Katana's camp, even rewarded for his bravery on Al Na'ir . . . *ha!* Despite everything, Bhatia grinned. There were two constants, at least. Katana was a soft fool, and Fusilli his worm at the heart of Katana's little apple. And now that Katana was so very prestigious, maybe he could arrange for her assassination on her way to Dieron, perhaps, or before . . .

Yet her death would not answer the root of the Combine's problem: the Peacock. Anything he did hereafter must bring about two complementary aims: Katana's destruction, and Vincent Kurita's demise. Theodore would have to go, of course; there was no way around that. And Emi Kurita . . . no, he mustn't forget about their resourceful little Keeper of the House Honor. Certainly, no secret where *her* allegiances lay. She would have to be dealt with as well. "Because there is yet another," he said, and his thoughts centered on the look in New Samarkand Warlord Matsuhari Toranaga's eyes that day in the Black Room almost a year before. "There is yet one more way."

In the next instant, however, his mood darkened again. His eyes cut to his desk and the two holoivid data disks he'd received that afternoon. One he'd already listened to: a field report. He traced the disk with the tip of a finger. The disk had been recorded over three months ago, but only couriered to him from Asta now. A tidbit of information: an ISF agent, still working on instructions Bhatia had given when the hunt for the Bounty Hunter began, had gathered intelligence about a black marketer who'd confided that there'd been rumors about a set of green armor being made for someone *on Asta*. And yet . . . Bhatia's eyes narrowed. *And yet*, at last report, the Bounty Hunter was on *Ancha*, Katana's new headquarters now that Proserpina was returned to the Benjamin District, and reported to be quite the golden boy. "And now there are two," he murmured. His eyes tracked to the second disk, and this he now lifted from

the desk and slid into a projector. There was a click, and then a whirr, and then an electronically altered voice he knew very well.

“Good evening, Director. Did you think I’d forgotten you? Absolutely not. I’ll make a deal. You be a good little boy and I’ll forget *all about* those nasty little plans you had for me. Because if you don’t, well . . . you’ll never guess what I’ve found: Some *very interesting* recordings of some *very important* communiqués and—well, what do you know—I have one you received from Fusilli *waaaaay* back when he reports how things went *so well* on Al Na’ir. Now what would happen, I wonder, if the coordinator got wind that you knew so very much in advance about Sakamoto? So, if I choose to put these recordings into, say, Katana’s hands, or, worse yet, the *coordinator’s* . . .”

Bhatia punched the audio to silence. No need for more. The threat was plain. *But* . . . “You’ve made a mistake, my friend.” And as a slow, satisfied smile spread along his lips, Bhatia felt something he hadn’t in many months: elation. “You think I cannot play at this game? Well, you are wrong. Either you are on Asta and heading this way, or to another world Katana controls—or you are on Ancha, because that is the only way to explain it. You could only have gained information about Fusilli if you were *proximate* . So I would wager that you, Kappa, are standing alongside Katana at this very moment, on Ancha, biding your time. Yes, you are cunning. But so am I. And I can wait as long as need be.”

Indeed—Bhatia regarded the disk almost lovingly—this might be the calm before the storm.

Carter City, Ancha

Dieron Military District, Draconis Combine

15 February 3136

The apartment was spare, and the air musty, smelling of mildew and stale cigarette smoke. The radiator’s pipes clanked and hissed, and the dingy ochre paint on the walls peeled in moist curls. The building was ugly on the outside, too. The only window overlooked a red brick alley cluttered with oversize trash bins. Despite all this, Jonathan wasn’t moved to find better accommodations because, well, hiding in plain sight took a certain facility. Heaven *forbid* the Bounty Hunter should be seen in the company of one of the wealthiest men in the Combine, and staying in a posh hotel, no less.

From his spot on the sofa—unctuous beige with clots of stuffing boiling through rips—Jonathan eyed his brother. Marcus sat in his chair, his limbs streaked with sweat in the overheated room, his powerful chest muscles struggling under gravity. Marcus had grumbled, wondering why Jonathan didn’t want to talk via communications link. Jonathan had instead insisted that Marcus come planet-side to enjoy the fruits of their labors.

“Fruits?” Marcus sucked air. “Kurita’s still in power and Katana’s a fracking *warlord!*” He sucked in another breath. “You took care of everyone else. But Katana? No, she gets to live.”

“She lives because that pleases me.” Jonathan gave a negligent yawn and stretched. His spanking new, emerald-green armor creaked at its joints. A good thing Marcus was so well off. Even better *that he’d* become such a wizard with computers: a hundred different accounts under as many aliases, and brimming with lovely cash. He toyed with his new helmet, admiring his reflection. “Alive, she suits our needs.”

It pleased him when Marcus’ skin turned dark as a beet. “*Our* needs?” he wheezed. “Aren’t we really talking about *your* needs?”

“No,” he lied. (It came so naturally.) “Marcus, the best way to make someone suffer is to take away everything they hold dear, everything they care about—but a little at a time. You hold out hope that things will get better, and then they don’t. We know what that’s like, don’t we, Brother? Our father divorced our mother, but we hung on to him, became his little shadows.” An image in his mind’s eye: of the day he was made, finally, a Son of the Dragon after years of training—and all because his father would not call *him* son. “And then Father simply disappeared, leaving us on our own. So I ask you. Is killing Katana *punishment*? She can only die once. But take away what and who she cares for, and she’ll wish she was dead. *That’s* revenge—slow and sweet.”

“Only sweet for you.” Marcus made a horsey sound. “You like killing. But that’s not even it. You actually *like* the little bitch. In fact”—he eyed his brother shrewdly—“I think you’re a little *in love* with her.” When he saw his brother’s expression, he gave a nasty laugh. “That’s it, isn’t it? Great, this is just perfect. I wonder if dear Katana will mind bondage, or if she’ll prefer some of your more creative antics in the boudoir?”

For the first time in his life, Jonathan was stunned to silence—and what was more: Marcus had made *him* angry. How had he done that? *I’m in control; I’m always in control . . .*

“I . . . *admire* her,” he said, choosing his words with care. “I’m like any hunter, Marcus. I appreciate the wiliness of the fox even as I run it down.”

“But in your own good time.” Marcus laughed again, but silently, like a dog. “You think I don’t see what’s going on? Look at you: safely ensconced in Katana’s camp, Crawford and little Emi falling all over you with gratitude; and you’ve got Bhatia by the balls. Being so beloved and in so many camps is handy, isn’t it? Except that’s not even it. This isn’t about vengeance for you anymore.”

“Indeed?” Jonathan kept his voice light. “Then what is it, Brother?”

“Katana Tormark. That’s all. You *need* Katana alive.”

“Do I,” said Jonathan, his tone dry but when he toyed with his visor, his fingers shook. “My, Marcus, all this armchair psychoanalysis . . . just why would I need Katana *alive*?”

“Because you love her. The killing is almost beside the point now. Now, every time a woman begs for her life, you hear Katana’s voice. Every time you fantasize about a woman, it’s Katana you see, Katana’s body under your hands. She’s gotten under your skin. Whatever plans we made together are gone—because you *want* her. You love killing; you love her suffering; and you love *her*. But you’ve got a problem. Eventually . . .” And now Marcus leaned forward and said with a confidential air, “You’ll *have* to kill her, and do you know why? Because wanting her means *she* has the power, not you. So Katana will have to die—*or you* will. Because you are Death, Jonathan. And everyone you touch will die with you.”

Later, Jonathan would remember everything that came next: astonishment, then anger and mortification and then—relief. Yes, Katana *was* his; they were fated for one another; all the taboos had dropped away, and he would have her and he would possess her and he would destroy her: an inch at a time, for a very long, long time to come.

And then he felt it, that magical, sensual—*click*.

Jonathan gave a breathy laugh. “You’ve become quite the philosopher.” His new armor softly squealed as he stood, squared the helmet upon his head, felt it snick into place, heard the seals catch. The door lay

just beyond Marcus, and he started for it now. “And you’re dead right about one thing, you know.”

Marcus tracked him, twisting round to keep Jonathan in view as his brother moved for the door. “And that is . . . ?”

“Why, that I love killing,” said Jonathan, easily. “Watch.” His right hand flashed for the back of Marcus’ head, his left shot for the angle of Marcus’ jaw, and then he pushed right, pulled left, hard and fast. There was a sharp pop and then a crunch like a step on gravel. Sighing, Marcus folded at the waist, then slumped until his head touched his knees. His head slewed right, twisted. His eyes were still open. He didn’t blink.

Every nerve tingling, blood roaring through his veins, Jonathan stared at Marcus and said, “Yes, indeed, Brother.” Filtered through speakers, his voice hissed with a curious, susurrant hum, and that suited him because Jonathan now knew that he was separate, apart—and not altogether human. “I do believe you’re on to something.”

About the Author

Ilsa J. Bick is a writer as well as a recovering child and forensic psychiatrist. She is the author of prize-winning stories, such as “A Ribbon for Rosie,” *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds II* ; “Shadows, in the Dark,” *Strange New Worlds IV* ; and “The Quality of Wetness,” *Writers of the Future, Vol. XVI*. She’s written for BattleCorps.com , devoted to the Classic BattleTech universe, including “Memories of Fire and Ice at the Edge of the World” and “Surkai.” Her novella, “Break-Away” was the first installment of the *Proliferation Anthology*. Other work has appeared in *SCIFICTION* , *Challenging Destiny* , *Talebones* , *Beyond the Last Star* , and *Star Trek: New Frontier: No Limits* , among many others. Her first published novel, *Star Trek: The Lost Era: Well of Souls* , cracked the 2003 Barnes and Noble Bestseller List.

Forthcoming are the *Star Trek: Starfleet Corps of Engineers* novellas “Lost Time” and “Wounds, Part One” and “Wounds, Part Two.” Also forthcoming is “Bottomless,” in the *Star Trek: Voyager* anniversary anthology *Distant Shores* . She’s currently working on several mysteries, including one set in late Victorian England, and slated for a novel set in the *Star Trek: DS9* universe featuring Ro Laren.

When she isn’t working—like, yeah, when is that—she lives in (mostly frigid) Wisconsin with her husband, two children, three cats and other assorted vermin. Sometimes she even cooks for them.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Daughter of The Dragon

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