

**As the Mars Division prepares to depart for Earth...**

A distress call is received from the REF outpost on Peryton. A small task force is sent to investigate and mount a rescue mission. What they find on that mysterious world is far more dangerous than any of them dared to imagine.

A struggle is on between the Invid and the Robotech Masters for control of the planet. Why have these two foes returned to fight over this out of the way planet of wizards and sorcerers? Cut off from the rest of the REF, this small rescue force will uncover a secret that will threaten the future of the entire galaxy!

Outnumbered and with no chance of reinforcements, the REF warriors find themselves caught up in a battle to control a devastating power. Who will claim this dangerous prize, Invid or Masters? With no hope of escape, the rescuers will have to choose between...

**The Lesser of Two Evils!**



**ROBO-TECH**  
**ROBO-TECH**

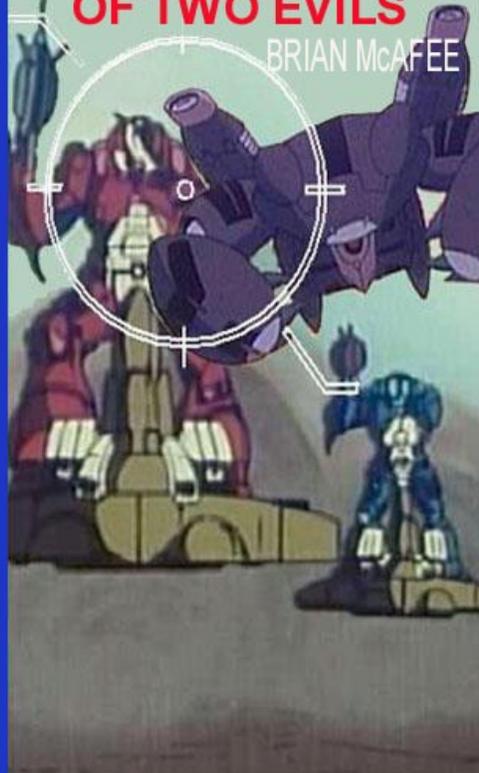
The SENTINELS The Lesser of Two Evils

Brian McAfee

**The SENTINELS**

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Original cover, pictured above, by author Brian McAfee. New cover art by Studio MMG is pictured on the last page of this document.

# **ROBOTECH**

## **The Sentinels**

**The Lesser of two Evils**

**By Brian McAfee**

**The following is based on Robotech created and owned by  
Harmony Gold USA Inc.**

[www.geocities.com/bmcafee\\_98/Novel.html](http://www.geocities.com/bmcafee_98/Novel.html)

Special Thanks to:

Robert Andino, Chris Caban, Clinton Napier, James Laidlaw, Eric Roal, William Moran, Robert Stram, and all the rest of my Robotech RPG players.

And to Stephanie, my wife, for all her help.

*And so it was decided that the fleet that would liberate the Earth from the Invid would not depart all at once, but be staggered, divided into four divisions. These four divisions were then named after planets of the Sol system, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and Neptune. Mars Division would depart first, and would set up a command center on that planet. This command center, by virtue of its distance from the Earth would be fairly safe from counterattack by the Invid, unlike the REF base on Earth's moon. In the event of the total destruction of the attacking force, this Mars Base would provide continuity, passing valuable intelligence to the subsequent divisions of attacking ships so that they might be better prepared to deal with the Invid's defenses.*

*History of the Third Robotech War, Vol IV*

## **Chapter One**

**At one time, Tirol had been the center of the universe.** It had been the seat from which the Robotech Masters had ruled their vast empire. On this day, however, the Masters were gone. They had journeyed to Earth to reclaim their lost Protoculture Matrix, with which their power could be sustained indefinitely. However, the Earth had proven to be their tomb rather than their salvation and on the other side of the galaxy, their empire had crumbled beneath the armies of their ancient enemy, the Invid.

The Invid were slug like creatures that, with few exceptions, lived their entire lives inside metallic, powered

exoskeletons that gave them armor like a tank and the firepower to match. They had little trouble defeating the remnants of the Masters' forces on Tirol. Only the sick and the elderly remained. The Invid did not hold their prize for long, however. When the Robotech Expeditionary Force (REF) arrived after its long journey from Earth, a battle ensued, and the home world of the Robotech Masters changed hands once more as the humans took possession of the capitol. War raged across that part of the galaxy, and one by one, the Invid lost their grip on each of their conquered worlds.

It was the year 2042 (by Earth reckoning), those worlds that were once subject to the rule of the Masters, and subsequently fell into the clutches of the Invid, were free again. The Invid Regent was dead and his forces defeated. Back home on Earth, the Invid Regess had taken the Earth and transferred her throne from Optera to that blue jewel of a planet that had survived the assaults of the Zentraedi and the Robotech Masters. Her victory was absolute. Resistance was virtually unheard of, although there were a few small groups of freedom fighters, the largest of which was led by Colonel Jonathan Wolfe, hero of two Robotech wars. But even he was no threat to the Invid rule.

With their side of the galaxy seemingly stable, the REF pursued a plan to take the Earth back from the Regess. Over Tirol, a fleet of Robotech ships was being assembled. The 21<sup>st</sup> Mars Division was preparing to return home. The 10<sup>th</sup> Mars Division had departed four years earlier, and met a disastrous end at the hands of the Invid. This would be a much larger fleet than before. At night on the surface of the planet it looked as if the stars drifted quickly across the sky from west to east, an effect caused by all the orbiting ships reflecting the light of the sun.

In the Tiresian capitol, humans outnumbered the native inhabitants two to one. The sun was high in the sky and the pale disk of Fantoma, the giant world around which Tirol orbits, could be seen filling the eastern sky. The buildings lining the road were of a Romanesque architecture with many columns and steps. The sidewalks and shops were full of people, most of whom wore REF uniforms. Most of the talk was of the impending departure of the 21<sup>st</sup> Mars Division.

Among the crowd walked three robed men. They moved quickly down the street without saying a word to each other or anyone they passed. All three looked identical since they, like the rest of the native Tiresians, were clones. Everyone in the Robotech Masters' society had two identical twins. These three were tall, with long, straight brown hair, which hung most of the way down their backs. Their names were Shran, Baz, and Dakon. Before the fall of the Robotech Masters, they had been clone masters, directing the activities of the other clones in battle and in their mundane daily toils. This day, they made their way toward the large, metallic looking pyramid at the center of the city, known as the Royal Hall.

The three knew well the ins and outs of the Royal Hall. They entered un-noticed through a small door that had not been used in decades and made their way to a room deep within. They moved swiftly down several long metallic corridors. They moved as stealthily as possible, since the humans of the REF had occupied the building since they took the planet from the Invid. The prize they sought was knowledge and it was contained in a computer in a room deep beneath the foundation of the pyramid.

Hearing voices coming from around a bend in the corridor, the three ducked through an open door and into a storage room

filled with old Robotech Master furniture and equipment that had been replaced with human equipment when the REF took over. Shran, Baz and Dakon took cover behind a large console as the voices grew nearer.

Two men in REF uniforms stopped at the door of the storage room and looked in. Fortunately for the three intruders, it was dark in the room. One of the two REF guards shined a flashlight around the room briefly. The second guard chided him, saying, "Come on Joe, what do you expect to find in there? The Robotech Masters? Were they here the last hundred times you checked? No, and they're not in there now. Let's go, there's nothing here, and there never will be! We might as well accept that we have the most boring jobs in the galaxy."

Joe answered back, "Yeah, I guess you're right. Let's go hit the chow hall, I'm hungry."

The two guards continued down the corridor. With a great sense of relief, the three Masters rose from their hiding places and continued their quest. They found a vertical access tube that had once been a type of elevator shaft. They climbed down and followed another dark corridor to a room, which was locked with a computerized cipher lock. They entered the appropriate code and the door opened. Inside was a computer terminal. The room was dimly lit by the computer's monitor screen. They retrieved the information that was their ultimate goal, and they smashed the computer to keep the same information from falling into the hands of the humans.

They exited the building uneventfully, encountering no more guards. Soon they were back on the city streets, heading toward the spaceport on the other side of town. At the spaceport, the three Masters boarded a small red shuttlecraft of Perytonian design. The shuttle drew little attention as it arrived

earlier that day, being a common sight these days, and it drew no more attention as it departed.

In space above the planet, the three finally spoke. Their voices sounded strangely synthetic as they rejoiced in their triumph.

"Those foolish humans have no idea that they have lost the greatest treasure in the galaxy!" cried Shran.

"Indeed," answered Baz, "with it we may take the entire galaxy for our very own."

"Let us not celebrate yet, brothers, for there is still much work to be done," added Dakon.

The small red shuttle passed silently through the hundreds of REF warships in orbit over Tirol. The shiny armor plating of the REF ships reflected the light of the sun. Most of these ships had never seen battle.

After a journey of several hours, the tiny shuttle finally approached a ship that was a stark contrast to the REF vessels. Although nearly the same size as one of the 2000-foot long Ikazuchi class Command Carriers, the Masters' ship was dark and organic looking. Its dark purple armor plating did not reflect the sunlight. It was camouflaged to match the darkness of space. Before the fall of the Robotech Masters Empire, it had been an all-purpose transport ship, carrying raw materials to the factories where greater ships were built. Now, it was the only hope of three desperate clones bent on rebuilding the empire.

Twenty-five thousand feet above the surface of Peryton, a lone blue alpha fighter flew south over the rolling waves of the ocean. It resembled a 20th century jet fighter, but it was capable of transforming around its pilot into a suit of power armor with agility greater than its own pilot and more firepower than a

division of 20<sup>th</sup> century tanks.

Umbra, the Perytonian sun, shone clearly on this midsummer day and there wasn't a cloud in the sky, save the contrail that traced the path of the fighter as it made its way south at twice the speed of sound toward the southern continent.

The pilot's name was Jason DeKirk. He was a private with the small REF outpost that had recently been set up here after the liberation of the planet from the Invid. For six months now, Jason had flown the same patrol routes, and seen the same sights three times a week. He had seen the great forest that covered the central region of the main continent, the snow covered rocky peaks of the western mountain chain, and most of the towns and cities along the southern coast, but never had he seen the enemy. Nor was he ever likely to. The Sentinels had driven the Invid from this world and the death of the Regent practically guaranteed that the only action a fighter pilot would see would be back on Earth, and Jason wasn't scheduled to go home for a long time.

Boredom had taken its toll on Jason and he now found himself giving in to temptation. He was putting the old adage, 'Curiosity killed the cat,' to the test. Instead of flying his normal patrol, he was flying toward the southern continent, a place that he had rarely seen. A little change of scenery would be welcome after six months of the same landmarks, day after day.

On the horizon, he could see the coastline as a thin white ribbon running between the blue of the ocean and the green of the jungle. The blue ocean beneath his fighter was quickly replaced by the rolling, tree-covered hills of the southern continent.

Something in the green of the jungle glinted in the sunlight and caught his attention. Jason slowed his alpha and descended

to get a better look. There must have been some metallic object on the surface, hidden by the jungle canopy. Perhaps it was a relic of the battle to free Peryton from the Invid. It could be an alpha fighter or an Invid scout shot down during the liberation.

Jason awoke, lying flat on his back in the middle of a grassy plain. He was still wearing his CVR-3 body armor. His head ached terribly and his first thought was that he must have crashed, but that could not be. There was no trace of his aircraft, no burning wreckage or distant fire. In fact, there were no lights at all for as far as the eye could see.

The last thing he remembered was flying south over the ocean. He checked himself for injuries and found none. The sky was dark and full of stars. His watch told him that it was about five o'clock in the morning.

Standing up, he found the cyclone from his alpha lying in the grass nearby. The cyclone, a set of powered armor, which could be transformed into a motorcycle, was stored in the alpha fighter as emergency survival equipment in case the pilot was forced to bail out in hostile territory.

The presence of the cyclone led him to conclude that he had indeed abandoned his fighter for some reason, although he had no memory of doing so. Strangely, the fact that there was no parachute present did not bother him. He simply chalked it up to the memory loss. Perhaps he had bailed out far from here and driven to this place without remembering.

He went over to the cyclone and opened the pack that was fastened to the bike behind the seat. In addition to the standard issue survival gear, he had packed a hand held navigation system, which told him exactly where he was on the planet. Luckily, he was only about two hundred miles west of his base, so he jumped on the cyclone and began driving east.

After riding for about an hour, he found himself heading directly into the rising sun. The grass covered hills gave way to a line of trees in the distance. Before reaching the trees, he found a familiar road which he knew would lead directly back to his base. He followed the road through a forest of tall hardwoods for another hour until a pair of sentries on the side of the road, wearing CVR-3 armor, challenged him.

In the base's med-center, the doctor asked him many questions about his memory loss. Standing behind the doctor was Jason's commanding officer, Colonel Cato, a tall muscular man who could be quite intimidating, even when one had not recently lost a billion dollar fighter with no explanation whatsoever.

"I was flying on my usual patrol route," said Jason, not mentioning that the last thing he remembered was seeing the ocean, "and the next thing I know, I'm lying on the ground next to my cyclone." Jason didn't know exactly why he had lied. Perhaps because he thought he would incur some level of blame, or the wrath of his commander, if they learned that he was not where he was supposed to be. "I assume that for some reason, I bailed out. Engine trouble or something... I don't remember. All I do remember is flying, and waking up on the ground."

"We should have the results from the tests in about half an hour," said the doctor. "If the colonel is finished with you, I'd suggest you go to the lounge and I'll send for you when the results are in."

"He can go to the break room, but I am far from finished with him. I want you in my office first thing tomorrow morning, Private. Get a good night's sleep and hopefully you will remember more in the morning," said the colonel.

Jason saluted smartly and headed off for the break room.

The colonel had no time to deal with him today. The loss of an alpha fighter was a trivial matter next to the other issues that had popped up during the night.

Colonel Cato was on his way to the communications center next. Sensors had picked up the presence of an Invid sensor nebula approaching Peryton. Sensor nebulae were how the Invid searched the galaxy for Protoculture and their precious flower of life. The presence of the nebula in the Peryton system was a dark omen indeed, and REF command on Tirol had to be informed.

As the colonel walked down the corridor toward the comm. center, the lighting changed from the familiar florescent overhead lights to flashing red. The red light was accompanied by a siren and a man's voice on the PA system saying, "All personnel to battle stations, this is not a drill!"

The colonel entered the comm. center and asked, "What the hell is going on?"

A short communications engineer answered back, "Sir, a fleet of Invid ships is defolding in orbit all around the planet!"

"Quick, send a distress call!" shouted Cato.

"Yes sir!" replied the engineer, but he had barely begun his transmission when a huge explosion rocked the base, and the lights went out. All power to the communications system was lost.

Aboard the Ikazuchi command carrier UES Roosevelt in orbit above Tirol, several pilots were called off of their normal duties to attend a briefing with Captain McKinney, commanding officer of the ship. When they arrived in the briefing room, they were surprised to find that only four pilots were summoned for the briefing. Two of them already knew each other, Private Alex

Summers, and Private Xavier Shanmaris were both alpha pilots from King Squadron. After talking with the other two pilots, they found out that they were Horizon-t shuttle pilots.

The two Horizon-t pilots tended to stay to themselves and crack jokes about veritechs and veritech pilots. They both had patches on their uniforms that said "I.Y.A.T.Y.A.C." When asked what it stood for, they seemed ever so pleased with themselves and responded, "If You Aren't Transport, You Aren't Crap!" The two veritech pilots didn't find this nearly as humorous as the two shuttle pilots seemed to.

The room was quite large, with about a hundred theater style seats facing the front, where there was a large video screen and a metallic podium. The four pilots took seats in the front row.

The Captain entered the room and the pilots stood at attention until he said, "As you were" and opened a folder containing papers and photos. The video screen came to life with a photo of a planet taken from orbit. The captain began, "Approximately six hours ago, we received a distress call from the REF outpost on Peryton. It is a small REF base left behind after the liberation of the planet from the Invid. All we know is that the Invid were sighted entering orbit. We lost communications with the base almost immediately, so we don't know how many Invid there might be. We will depart Tirol for Peryton along with two Garfish troop carriers in less than 3 hours. The three of you will recon the base and if necessary carry out a rescue of the surviving REF personnel. You can expect full orbit to ground fire support from our three ships. Prepare your mecha and be ready for immediate launch aboard a Horizon-t shuttle once we de-fold. The Horizon-t will be completely empty so it can accommodate the maximum number

of survivors. Rescue of any REF personnel is the top priority for this mission. If the Invid have set up a hive, we will attempt to destroy it only if time and conditions permit. We must be back here in place to leave with the rest of the fleet no later than five days from now to ensure we can be re-supplied before we leave for Earth. Are there any questions?"

Hands went up as the two veritech pilots had many questions for the captain. Alex asked, "Sir, can we expect civilians to be in the vicinity of the REF base? If so what are our orders on contact?"

The Captain replied, "Excellent question, private, there may be civilians in the region of the base, however it is sparsely populated so there won't be many. Also, associating with us might make civilians targets for the Invid, so keep it to a minimum."

Alex had one more question, "I knew those wizards could manage some pretty impressive tricks and I'd hate to see the shuttles damaged..." he threw a sidelong glance at the two Horizon-t pilots, grinning to show he meant no insult.

Lt Commander Ferguson, the senior shuttle pilot, jumped out of his seat and in a most unfriendly tone said, "Do you know who you're talking to, private? For your information, this is my sixth combat assault landing! I've got more combat time than you have time in the REF! As a matter of fact..."

"Sit down commander, I'm sure he meant nothing by it," said the captain calmly, "Private, you had better watch your tone when talking to a superior officer, and don't worry about the wizards attacking the shuttle, remember, the Invid are the enemy, we're here to help, and they know that. The shuttles will be stripped bare on the inside to accommodate survivors as well as pilots and their mecha who might need to be flown out of

there."

"Sir, what are the possibilities of a combat medic on the shuttle? If they have come under attack there may be wounded?" asked Alex.

"The two communications specialists on the shuttle crew are trained paramedics," the captain explained.

"Sir," asked Xavier, "Also, what are the conditions for orbital weapons support? Are we operating a scorched earth policy now? Or is it only in case of a hive being present?"

"What the hell are you thinking man?! These are our allies! We will limit collateral damage to the absolute minimum. Now if there are no more questions, you are dismissed!"

Xavier headed over to the ships supply office to grab some last minute gear. Alex, meanwhile, headed right to the hangar bay to prepare his mecha for the mission. He decided some smoke missiles might make good signals in a rescue situation. He then met up with Xavier and they both boarded the shuttle.

Lt Commander Ferguson, and his co-pilot Lieutenant Endlich, wasted no time tossing jeers at the two veritech pilots as they boarded. They told Alex and Xavier, "Take a seat in the troop compartment, keep your feet off the seats, and try not to get in the way." When Alex and Xavier started to board the shuttle, the two Horizon-t pilots turned to each other, give each other a high five, and said, "Chicks dig us, guys wanna be us!"

*“These things we do that others may live.”*

*Motto of the USAF Combat Rescue Forces*

## **Chapter Two**

**Inside the main hangar bay, the team was aboard the** shuttle as the Roosevelt began the fold operation. The Horizon-t was a long, sleek shuttle capable of carrying troops and mecha in the two large cargo pods carried one beneath each wing. Beneath the fuselage and between the cargo pods, an alpha fighter could be docked, allowing the pilot to move freely between the fighter and the shuttle. Alex’s fighter was docked beneath the shuttle while Xavier’s mecha was loaded into one of the cargo pods.

For the two veritech pilots in the belly of the shuttle, there was no doubt when the fold operation started. Everything around them grew blurry and they even felt a bit dizzy for a few minutes as the ship distorted the very fabric of space. Once the fold was over, their senses returned to normal.

Over the intercom, the captain announced, "The fold operation was successful, we are now approaching Peryton at

sub-light speed. We have detected four Invid mollusk class troop carrier ships and one command ship in orbit on the far side of the planet. They have made no aggressive moves yet and we suspect they may be only partially manned, with the majority of their forces on the surface. Our ships will attack the enemy and distract them while you make your way to the surface to recon the REF base. You may launch as soon as you are ready."

"Roger sir, we're launching now," responded Lieutenant Commander Ferguson. The Horizon-t lifted off the deck and moved slowly out the hangar door, into space. Once clear, it turned toward the planet and accelerated to ten times the speed of sound and hurtled toward its destination. The planet's main continent grew larger in the field of view, and the shuttle began to buffet when atmospheric resistance was encountered. From the flight deck, Corporal Hudson, one of the shuttle's communications specialists, turned to his companions and yelled, "We're on an express elevator to hell, goin' down!"

Hicks and Hudson were both new to the REF. Like so many others they had been born in space during the Pioneer mission. Excited about the fleet's return to Earth, they joined up when they were old enough. They felt privileged to have gotten assigned to Commander Ferguson's crew. He always seemed to be right in the middle of the action and he could fly a Horizon class shuttle like nobody else. They were half way convinced he could probably fly circles around half the fighter pilots in the fleet.

The shuttle slowed to just twice the speed of sound and leveled off at ten thousand feet. Ferguson called the two veritech pilots up to the flight deck to take a look at the objective area.

"What do the sensors show, any survivors?" asked Alex.

"Yes, but only one," answered Hudson, "There are also four

shock troopers and... and one pincer command unit on the surface above the base. I can't tell how many Invid or friendlies, if any, are below ground."

Like most REF bases, the majority of the structure was subterranean, with only a few structures above ground. This arrangement was the product of lessons learned fighting the Zentraedi. Subterranean bases weathered orbital bombardment better than above ground structures.

Alex looked at the view screen where an image of the base was displayed, along with the location of the Invid. The four shock troopers looked like twenty foot tall, bipedal, metallic stone crabs rummaging through the above ground remains of the base. He was familiar with these. The pincer command unit, a more powerful and capable version of the Invid's mecha was new to the whole crew. Although still alien looking with its reverse articulated legs, it was far less crab like than the troopers.

"I'll try to draw them away from the base. On my way in I'll mark a landing zone for you to put down in," said Alex. "Xavier get ready to roll out and look for survivors, I'll keep 'em busy and out of your hair."

Ferguson agreed that the plan sounded reasonable and told the two veritech pilots to take their stations.

With that, Alex walked back through the long connecting corridor that ran between the bridge and the main body of the ship. The lights had changed from the usual bright florescent lighting to a green light designed to help the eyes adjust to low light levels and not interfere with optics such as infra red and night vision. Alex headed down the stairs to where his alpha was attached to the underbelly of the Horizon-t. A maintenance technician helped him climb down into the cockpit and strapped

him in. He tried not to show any nervousness, as this was his first combat mission. The butterflies in his stomach were almost unbearable. The maintenance tech handed him his CVR-3 helmet, and he pulled it onto his head, closed the visor, and gave a thumbs up. The alpha fighter's canopy closed and he separated from the shuttle.

Once clear, he launched into a steep dive directly at the base. On the way down, he looked over the terrain carefully. When he had a good handle on the layout of the base and surrounding area he fired a single smoke missile at a clearing he thought would be suitable for the shuttle to set down in. At the last possible second, he pulled out of the dive and passed over the base at mach two, just three hundred feet off the ground. The resulting sonic boom knocked the Invid off their feet. The Invid wasted no time responding. They stood back up and immediately took to the air to give chase. Everything was going according to Alex's plan.

The shuttle set down just long enough to let Xavier out; his alpha was stowed in the left cargo pod. When the shuttle settled to the ground, the cargo door opened and Xavier was on his way to assist in the rescue.

Ferguson, wanting to leave as much support equipment as possible, but limit the shuttle's exposure to enemy fire, detached the cargo pods and lifted back off. Xavier transformed his alpha from guardian to the human like battloid configuration and approached the base on foot, while trying to remain as stealthy as he could.

Private Swift Wildcard was the pilot of a beta fighter, disabled on the ground above the REF base. His mecha had lost both legs, an arm and had severe damage to the body. He had

shut off the power, hoping the Invid who were rummaging through the remains of the base would overlook him. To his surprise, the Invid were knocked to the ground by the huge sonic boom caused by Alex's alpha fighter passing over the base at supersonic speed.

When the Invid took off to chase the alpha, Wildcard saw his chance to escape. He climbed out of his beta and quickly donned his cyclone armor. He then turned his beta's power back on and set the self-destruct system on a time delay. He knew the Invid would be drawn to the protoculture emanations given off by his active mecha. It was perfect bait.

The tree line on the east side of the base was a short run away. Once he got there he made a radio call, "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, this is Private Swift Wildcard, beta pilot with REF Peryton base. My mecha has been disabled. I have taken cover in the tree line to the east of the base. Request immediate pickup."

Almost immediately, he heard another radio call. A familiar voice with a slight Russian accent said, "This is Corporal Chris Drakinn, REF recon pilot. Is someone out there? I am trapped below ground in the REF base along with one other. Invid are near by. Request assistance ASAP!"

"Hang on guys, help is on the way!" replied Xavier picking up the pace and taking his alpha to the air.

Just then, the four shock troopers returned to investigate the powered up beta. Two of them began to claw at the disabled mecha. The timer on the self-destruct system reached zero. When it exploded, the two closest shock troopers were blown nearly in half, while the others were knocked to the ground, stunned but not visibly damaged.

Wildcard was overjoyed that his plan had worked, but there

were still two shock troopers to deal with. In the distance he could hear the familiar deep bass roar of a GU-XX gun pod firing. Alex was engaging the pincer command unit in aerial combat a few miles north of the base.

Down in the bowels of the base, Jason DeKirk and Corporal Chris Drakinn were trapped in the lounge. Jason had been relaxing in the lounge, watching the news with Drakinn and waiting for the results of his tests when the base had suddenly come under attack. Only seconds after the alarm sounded, there was a huge explosion which caused the roof to cave in, trapping them. The power was knocked out during the battle which took place on the surface above the base, but emergency lighting gave them enough light to see by. Corporal Drakinn, in his slight Russian accent asked Jason, "Do you have any idea about how to get out of this mess? I do not like this. Not being able to help our comrades on the surface. We should probably check the air vent as a possible way out, there is no way to know who is winning up there."

Jason agreed and they looked into the vent in the corner of the room, but they heard the unmistakable sound of Invid moving around at the other end. The metal on metal beating of the Invid footfalls were loud, and the scraping sound of the mecha against the sides of the metallic corridor walls was unnerving. The fighting on the surface seemed to have calmed down, but an occasional explosion still rocked the base.

Cpl Drakinn radioed, "Private Wildcard this is Corporal Drakinn we are trapped below the surface in the base. I am with corporal DeKirk. We have located a vent shaft and will be attempting to escape the base through the vent. My advice to you is to lay low and don't do anything to draw attention to

yourself. Do you copy?"

Wildcard responded, "Uh, well, it's a little too late for that. Can't talk now, got company. I'll get back to you when I've run off these unwelcome visitors."

Next, Drakinn turned to Jason, "Private, could you come over here and help me remove this vent cover? Try to be quiet, OK?" To lighten the mood and relax the private he looked at him with a half smile, "Don't you just love the REF, every day a new adventure!"

When they had removed the cover, Jason volunteered to climb into the vent. He had no weapon or flashlight, but he was willing to give the vent a try. With the grate removed, he followed the ventilation shaft to another grate. He could hear Invid, but couldn't see any.

Corporal Drakinn made one more radio call before shutting off his radio to keep it from giving away their position.

"Wildcard, this is Drakinn, there are Invid troopers in the base. Unknown number. I will be turning off my radio until I am able to find a secure point to check in, Drakinn out."

Cpl Hicks, the comm. operator on the Horizon-t replied, "Corporal Drakinn, Horizon-t copies all. Monitor radio transmission every half hour starting on the hour."

Drakinn acknowledged the instructions and turned off his radio. Next he pulled out his .45 caliber M1911 and climbed into the vent behind Jason. "Be careful up there. Make sure the coast is clear. We need to get to the armory or the Mecha bay so we have a fighting chance."

With pistol in hand, Drakinn finally realized the irony of the situation. He was the last one in line in this duct, but the only one with a weapon. He had a quick laugh at himself and called to Jason, "Here friend, you want a weapon? I have a

pistol you could use since you've got point. I don't know what good it will do against an Invid, but you are welcome to it."

Jason took the weapon and thanked Drakinn kindly. While it was true that killing an Invid with a pistol was practically impossible, it still made him feel better to have the gun in hand. Jason found another vent into a corridor that both he and Drakinn knew lead not only to the surface, but also to the main mecha storage bay. The sound of Invid was loud, they could hear them bashing the hell out of something, but they didn't see any in the corridor.

Drakinn asked, "Jason, if you can pull off the vent cover and slide it in with us I will take it and put it behind us, then take a peek out there and see if it is safe for us to exit. If it is clear we will attempt to find out their numbers and report them back to the surface. If there aren't that many we can suit up in any cyclones that we may find and do a little damage."

Jason replied, "I like your thinking, lets go."

On the surface, Wildcard charged the Invid who had survived the blast from the exploding beta fighter. He fired the thrusters on his cyclone armor as he ran and vaulted into the air coming to rest directly on the faceplate of the closest shock trooper. It was taken by surprise and he got a perfect shot at its sensor eye. The blast from his Gallant H-90 energy rifle tore a gaping hole in the Invid's sensor eye and he could see directly into the pilot's compartment as the slug like Invid within flopped around in his nutrient fluid and died. Without warning, the other shock trooper knocked him to the ground with a swipe from his claw! The damage to his cyclone was minor but he was still a little shocked. The shock trooper raised it's claw high into the air in preparation for a killing blow that would smash Wildcard

into the ground.

Below ground, Jason and Drakinn exited the vent and made their way to the mecha storage bay to hopefully find some cyclones and take care of the Invid they could hear tearing something to pieces. Once there, they peeked through the door to see four Invid armored scouts beating the hell out of the remains of a beta fighter. The scouts were the smallest and least well armed of the Invid's crab like mecha. The four Invid had already smashed all the other REF veritechs. Drakinn turned on his radio to report to topside on the numbers of Invid, but before he could speak, he heard, "This is the UES Roosevelt to all REF ground forces, we are engaging the Invid fleet!"

The four Invid in the mecha bay immediately flew out of the hangar. Jason and Drakinn also heard Alex on the radio saying that the pincer command unit was retreating as well.

Back on the surface, Wildcard was sure he was about to die as the Invid swung its metallic claw right at him. Strangely, it stopped in mid swing and flew nearly straight up into the sky, until it was no longer visible. From the main hangar bay of the base, the four Invid armored scouts emerged and flew up into the sky just like the trooper. He then got a message from Drakinn and Jason saying, "This is Corporal Drakinn and Private DeKirk, the Invid inside the base have retreated. We will rendezvous with you outside of the hanger, copy?"

Wildcard acknowledged the message and then received a message from Ferguson, "We are going to retrieve the cargo pods and then we will make a landing at the base to pick up all personnel."

Umbra began to set in the west, and in the twilight a small

fireball, little more than a flickering point of light in the darkening firmament, crossed the sky leaving behind a dirty, black smoke trail. It was a disabled starship burning as it entered the upper atmosphere. Wildcard couldn't help but wonder if it was REF or Invid.

Jason and Drakinn made their way to the surface just in time to see the flaming comet slowly cross the purple-black evening sky. As it moved, it got slowly but perceptibly brighter and small pieces broke off and left small smoke trails of their own. Although the sun had already set, that high in the sky the burning ship still received direct sunlight, making it seem all the brighter. By the looks of it, the starship would crash into the ocean to the east.

The Horizon-t picked up the two cargo pods and landed in the middle of the remains of the REF base. The two alpha fighters piloted by Alex and Xavier landed on either side of the shuttle and the crew of the Horizon-t came out to help with the loading of salvageable equipment and survivors.

A detailed search of the wreckage turned up no more REF personnel. Wildcard, Drakinn and Jason were the only survivors of the Invid attack. In the mecha bay, three battler cyclones were salvaged along with two crates of high explosive mini-missiles, which could be utilized by their cyclones should they use up their current load.

Drakinn ventured back into the ruins of the base and returned to his quarters to gather some of his personal effects and equipment, including a pair of infrared distancing binoculars that he thought might come in handy. Both Drakinn and Wildcard grabbed their CVR-3 armor from their lockers near the mecha bay. The suits of armor were great protection by themselves, but absolutely essential if one wanted to wear the

full cyclone armor system. Changing your cyclone from motorcycle mode to armor mode without a suit of CVR-3 to protect you could be quite hazardous to one's health.

The group gathered in one of the open cargo pods to discuss the events of the day. Ferguson began by saying, "Since there aren't any wounded to return to the command carrier for treatment, we should move on to the REF Recreation Center approximately 400 miles to the northwest. There are sure to be more survivors and equipment there. I'd like Alex and Xavier to fly escort for the Horizon-t. The rest of you should suit up in your cyclones and be ready to come out fighting as soon as we hit the ground. We never got a distress call from the rec. center, so they may not have been attacked, but we should go in expecting the worst. Are there any questions or comments before we get started?"

Alex was first to speak, "No questions from me, Xavier and I will make sure nothing gets through to the shuttle. We know how delicate she is."

Ferguson was enraged. "Ok, that's it! I've had enough of your crap Private. If I hear one more comment like that out of you, I'll have you take a seat in the shuttle and hand your fighter over to one of these new guys. Understood?"

Alex looked quickly around the group and saw the look on Wildcard, Drakinn, and Jason's faces as they tried not to look too eager to get his fighter.

Wildcard, with a grin on his face, went so far as to say, "You gonna let him talk to you like that Alex?"

Alex swallowed his pride and said, "There's no need to change mecha assignments, sir. I meant no disrespect."

Drakinn said, "Sir, I am trained in recon. When we get near enough, another volunteer and I can take two cyclones in. I

should be able to give some advanced information so we don't go flying into a hornet's nest."

"I like that. In fact, I like that a lot," said Ferguson, "But who is going to be crazy enough to go riding in there with you?"

He looked over at Wildcard, "So what about it, Swift, do you want to come along for the ride? If not, I'll understand."

Wildcard replied in a fatalistic tone, "Yeah, I'm game...If I'm going to die, might as well be now." Wildcard had been on many a mission with Drakinn before. He was only too happy to help out his old friend.

Lastly, Drakinn turned to Jason and said, "Well, so long as Alex keeps his comments to himself, it looks like you are riding a cyclone as well. Want to come with us?"

"Right, I seem to have misplaced my alpha," said Jason. The rest chuckled at the comment, but Jason didn't so much as crack a smile. He hadn't meant it as a joke, he really had misplaced it. "Sure, I'm in. Let's do this," he said.

Drakinn was enthusiastic, "Well let's get going Jason and Swift! We will use the gasoline fuel tanks and make sure to keep an eye on the radar. I'll ride point, you two stay between half a mile and a mile back all right? Be ready to rush in if I get jumped."

After Jason and Wildcard both volunteered to go with Drakinn, Ferguson said, "Well, I guess there's safety in numbers, or whatever. Well, let's saddle up. It's getting dark and we've been at this for a while. Hopefully we can get a little rest when we get to the rec. center."

After traveling only a short while, the shuttle received a coded message from the Roosevelt. The Invid fleet had been destroyed, however both Garfish Troop Carriers were lost and the Roosevelt had sustained heavy damage, the fold system was

inoperative, but could be repaired. More importantly, the anti-ship turrets, the ships primary weapon, had been completely destroyed. The Ikazuchi had been in contact with the local government and had learned that about a week prior to the arrival of the Invid, a Robotech Master ship was sighted in orbit, but disappeared when an Invid Sensor Nebula passed near the planet.

Also, the command carrier said they had detected an Invid hive on the far western edge of the continent, hidden in the mountains. There was also an unusual magnetic reading coming from the continent to the south. It could be an underground complex, or a buried ship. A map was transmitted to the team detailing the locations of both.

All efforts at contacting the rec. center by radio were in vain. Hudson pointed out that they may be able to contact them when they got closer. Several REF ships had been reporting difficulty with long range communications lately.

The Horizon-t landed well out of sight of the recreation center and the three cyclone riders were unloaded to begin their recon mission. Corporal Drakinn took point and the others spaced themselves out behind him. They followed a north/south running road that went straight to the main gate. When Drakinn eventually came in sight of the gate, he saw a guardhouse next to the road, but he was too far out to tell if there was anyone manning it.

*Memorandum For REF Outpost Commanders:*

*As you know, not all of us will be returning to Earth with the fleet. In order to promote stability in this region, outposts will be maintained on Tirol and several other planets in the vicinity. In the interest of improving morale and providing for the well being of those REF members who will be staying behind to man these outposts, commanders are hereby authorized to use REF funds to purchase property and construct facilities for morale and recreation purposes. Design of these facilities will be entirely up to each individual unit, so long as the requirements set forth in the attached instructions are adhered to.*

*RICHARD HUNTER, ADMIRAL, REF  
Commander*

## **Chapter Three**

**Corporal Robert Farino was the chief of security at the REF Recreation Center at Boonta Lake (Better known as Booty Bay Casino due to its pirate theme and decor). The facility was located on the southern shore of the lake, and in addition to the usual resort facilities, members could rent water craft and enjoy fishing for exotic species of fish. Despite all the potential distractions the recreation center offered, Robert spent most of**

his time in the control room in the basement of the facility. When the Invid invaded the planet, he intercepted the distress call from the base and sent the majority of his security force to help. So far, the Invid had left the casino alone.

The facility had a small inventory of mecha, including one shadow alpha and one shadow beta in the underground mecha parking garage. The shadow mecha had a special, fourth dimensional shield that masked the emissions of their protoculture power sources, making them almost invisible to the Invid. Colonel Cato had recently acquired a pair of the advanced fighters and housed them in the rec. center's mecha bay.

Also, in a vault in the basement, there was an old Robotech Master nuke, similar to the ones used in the defense of Tirol when the Invid invaded. It was left behind by the Masters decades ago, and was confiscated by the security team when some of the locals told them of its existence last month. It was a small nuke, approximately 7-kiloton yield. However, it was definitely not something Robert wanted to leave behind if he had to evacuate.

A lot of local Perytonians worked at the casino, and Corporal Farino got along well with them. Lately he had heard rumors about bioroids attacking towns to the south, but he thought they might be mistaking Invid shock troopers for bioroids. Still, he was concerned.

Fearing the Invid had destroyed the REF base, Corporal Farino issued orders to his only remaining member of his security force, his long time friend Reara, remain on alert and prepare for possible evacuation. Meanwhile, Private Brian Stuart, in the mecha parking garage, prepared the mecha for a quick departure if necessary.

Private Reara, a micronized female Zentraedi Warrior approximately six feet tall with long flowing reddish orange hair (when not micronized, she was a towering fifty two feet tall) had been assigned to patrol the perimeter of the rec. center in her Heavy Assault Pod. The assault pod was a recent upgrade of the REF Zentraedi Battle Pod. Unlike previous pods, this one could transform into three modes: Battloid mode, which resembled the veritech's humanoid battloid mode, guardian or pod mode, which looked much like the old bipedal Zentraedi officer's pod (often described as a metallic, headless ostrich), and Tank mode, which was very much like the Southern Cross hovertank which, although heavily armored and armed, could move at great speeds, hovering only feet above the terrain. It had lots of firepower and the mobility to match. The heavy assault pod was the latest in the short line of mecha specially made for the few micronized Zentraedi loyal to the REF.

The casino was primarily staffed by local Perytonians who looked at Reara with disdain. After all, they had lived under the oppression of her people's former masters for most of their lives.

She had made one complete circuit of the compound and was approaching the main gate. There was a thirty-foot tall and ten-foot wide concrete barrier that ran the entire circumference of the compound, except along the waterfront. The wall was designed to stop, or at least slow down mecha that could not fly. In the center of the compound was the recreation center, a five story tall building with a neon sign that flashed "Casino". Brian, the sole REF maintenance technician, had fashioned the sign himself, and was quite proud of it. A road ran from the front of the building directly south to the front gate. On the east side of the compound was the underground mecha storage bay. Above

ground, there was a landing pad capable of handling a starship the size of a Garfish Troop Carrier.

As she approached the front gate, Reara felt a sense of anxious excitement. She couldn't explain it, but she felt that something was about to happen.

Outside the gate, the three cyclone riders had gathered by the side of the road to get a better look. There was a large billboard sign next to the guardhouse that read "REF Recreation Center". There didn't seem to be any movement. Drakinn took out his infrared distancing binoculars and scanned around the main gate. He noticed that it was manned by a very tall individual whose eyes seemed to glow in the dark, but that's all he could tell about him. He could also make out the heat signature of a bipedal mecha approaching the main gate from the east. It looked like a Zentraedi battlepod and that made him a bit nervous. He briefed his two companions on what he saw.

Back in the control room beneath the casino, Corporal Farino was having a conversation with Chronma, the Perytonian manager at the casino. Farino said, "We're evacuating. This place is a major target. I am giving the order to pack all essential materials including the nuke into the emptied bomb bays of the beta. Also, have as many employees loaded into Brian's transport as possible. If there isn't enough space, they can also ride in the beta. Everyone in the facility is requested to help with evacuation preparations, arm them and send them to the mecha storage facility. It's been way too long for my garrison not to report. I am coding a message explaining our situation and requesting assistance. I'm also programming the facility's computer to broadcast the transmission in REF code as

a distress signal."

Chronma was less than pleased with Corporal Farino's plan and said, "My people will help you to make your preparations, but we will not be evacuating with you. We have families and we need to return to take care of them in this time of crisis."

Chronma was an imposing figure. He was six feet four inches tall and had foot long horns on his forehead. His eyes glowed red all the time making it difficult to tell what kind of mood he was in. This was in contrast to Robert's five and a half feet and dark brown hair. As well as his generally approachable demeanor.

Chronma asked, "I assume you will want to put on your cyclone armor to escort the nuclear device to the hangar bay, won't you? Besides, I wouldn't trust my life to a Zentraedi."

In the battlepod, Rera transmitted a message on an open channel, hoping someone was listening. She said, "This is REF rec. center security to any REF personnel in the base vicinity please respond."

Robert began to set the transmitter to send the automated message when he heard an unexpected reply to Rera's transmission, "Rec. Center this is Corporal Drakinn of the REF do you read, what is your status."

As the REF transmission was finishing he told Chronma, "Don't go anywhere yet." With a grin on his face, he turned around, slapped the transmit button on the console and said, "This is Corporal Farino, Chief of security, REF Recreation Center. We're packing up and getting ready to go. The stench of slugs has reached us, though not their sting yet. I sent a team to assist the main base this morning and haven't heard from them yet. This outpost is not defensible with the amount of personnel

I have left. Our civilian staff, locals mostly, wish to remain to defend their homes. Would it be possible for us to give them any kind of assistance? Maybe a head start in getting back to their village? Besides them we're three left. If you have any info about my men it would be much appreciated." He sighed to himself, "Please have good news."

After finishing that transmission he turned around to ask Chronma, "How about it, might we drop you off at your house? I'd advise you to take as many weapons with you as you can. If you decide to stay, you're going to need them. Even though I'll plead with you one last time, if we find enough space for you and your families in the fleet, would you evacuate with us? This place is going to become a hell hole pretty soon and right now we don't have the firepower to send the slugs back to the puddle from which they crawled."

Chronma said, "We would gladly accept transportation to another, safer, village. It is most kind of you to offer. But first, we must locate a couple of children who were last seen leaving this morning on land speeders. Any help you could provide would be appreciated, however I realize that you are somewhat pre-occupied."

Robert agreed, "Sounds reasonable. Contact your people and have anyone who needs transportation to meet us at the mecha bay as soon as possible."

Still cautious to avoid a friendly fire incident, Drakinn called Rera again, "This is Corporal Drakinn, we will be on approach to the front gate in five minutes. As for the men you sent the news isn't good. There were only a few survivors from the base. You could contact the shuttle for a complete report, Corporal Drakinn out."

Reara, obviously unaware that her mic was still on said, "Where does Command find a truly masterful idiot to put in charge these days?! Now every Invid enforcer in the system knows we are under staffed, unarmed and ready to run! Why don't we invite the Invid for a snifter of brandy, and then we can gather around the blackjack table and watch the locals teach shock troopers to count to 21! Damn him! Damn that man!"

Farino mumbled to himself, "What the h..." and stopped in mid sentence as his eyes fall on the encryption control on the console and realized that it was de-activated. He slapped his hand against his forehead and asked nobody in particular "How could I be so careless?!"

Immediately he transmitted to Reara "Private Reara, I would appreciate it if you kept your constructive criticism contained until the debrief, right now I have an assignment for you. I need you to search for a couple of children who left this morning on land speeders and haven't returned yet. The REF will be here any minute and as soon as we have those kids back here we can take the locals home so we can get out of here. If the base was shot to hell and there is no use for us to hang around here and make ourselves and our civilians another target."

Reara was less than enthusiastic about her new assignment, but accepted it none the less.

Robert then turned to Chronma and told him, "Before you object to my sending Reara to search for our missing kids, Reara is a member of the Robotech Expeditionary Force, and as one appointed under my command, yes I would trust my life to her, as I would trust my life to any of my fellow REF warriors. Now lets go get that nuke."

With that Robert mounted his cyclone, turned on the engine

and asked Chronma, "Coming? Hop on."

Chronma said in a disappointed voice, "I realize that she is the only one available for the task. She will have to do," Then he climbed on the back of the cyclone and said, "Let's go get the bomb, I am eager to get out of here."

A few miles from the rec. center, the Horizon-t had yet to lift off. Alex and Xavier, their alphas in guardian mode, were keeping guard near the shuttle when they noticed headlights coming their way. Alex was staring at the readout on his alpha fighter, studying the nearby geography so he wouldn't be at a disadvantage in the night, however, he was starting to nod off; the approaching lights snapped him awake.

Seeing the two riders he opened a channel to Xavier. "I'll go see what they want Shanmaris, sit tight but watch your scanners for anything that might have followed them here."

The headlights were coming from two Perytonian land speeders. They stopped about a half-mile from the shuttle and seemed to be looking them over. Alex set his alpha down near them, lowered the nose nearly to the ground and opened the canopy. He stepped down from his alpha, reaching down to check that his antique sidearm was loose in its holster. *Not much use in a proper fight, but it's all I've got*, he mused. When he got a little closer, he could see the pilots of the land speeders were a couple of Perytonian youths about twelve years old. Alex walked towards them, his arms out to his sides, displaying no aggression. When he got within speaking range, Alex said, "Hello, I'm Private Summers... Alex... of the Robotech Expeditionary Force. What can I do for you?"

He stood patiently with his arms still outstretched and waited for their answer. The two youths came over to Alex

cautiously. The taller one, with a smooth hornless head and yellow eyes that glowed in the dark said, "Human, we saw something that might interest you. About ten kilometers back to the west we passed a field of Invid flowers. In the middle of the field was a strange mecha standing motionless. I've never seen anything like this mecha before. It was humanoid in shape, but it wasn't a bioroid nor was it one of yours."

At the sight of the glowing eyes Alex almost lost his composure, his hand slipped unconsciously towards his holstered pistol. Catching himself in time he listened to their tail. "Thank you for the information... Are there any more of your people out tonight? I'm going to check this out and I don't want to get a surprise..."

The Perytonian kids said that most of their people were nocturnal. "It's a kind of left over from the days of the curse. Back then, it wasn't safe to come out during the day. Now, even though the curse has been lifted, we still stay up all night and sleep during the day out of habit. We are going to head north toward the Casino where our parents work, if that's all right with you."

Alex sent them on their way and told Ferguson what he had heard, and Ferguson replied, "The team is approaching the main gate to the casino now. They have spotted one individual, probably Perytonian at the guardhouse and one possible Zentraedi battlepod inside the rec. center fence. I'll have Hicks give them an update on our situation. You are cleared to go check up on the unknown mecha. But be advised, it may be a trap designed to get you and Xavier away from the shuttle so someone else can attack it. If you get in trouble, I can't afford to send Xavier to back you up, he needs to stay here to guard the Horizon-t."

"Understood, sir. I'll meet back up with you at the casino," said Alex as he strapped himself back into his cockpit and took off in his alpha fighter.

Outside the gate to the casino, Drakinn said to his companions, "Lets get back on the road. The rec. center seems to be safe." Next he called back to the Horizon-t, "Shuttle this is Corporal Drakinn We have made contact with rec. center security and it appears to be secure. You can contact them when you are ready, they mostly have civilians who will more than likely need assistance."

Back at the Horizon-t, the Perytonian kids accepted an offer on Xavier's part to give them some food. They hadn't eaten all night. Like most kids, they were interested in spacecraft. They asked to look around the Horizon-t if it wouldn't be too much trouble, so Xavier let Corporal Hicks showed them up to the flight deck.

Robert and Chronma arrived at the basement of the main building and went to the vault. There, Robert entered the code that only he and Chronma knew. The foot thick titanium door unlocked and began to swing open slowly. In the ten foot by ten-foot vault there was a table in the center. On top of the table was a metallic sphere the size of a basketball held in a specially designed, shock resistant mount. On the surface of the shiny metal sphere was a time delay control consisting of a display panel and a flat pad beneath it where it seemed that keys should be, but it was smooth. Robert removed the sphere and placed it in the cargo box on the back of his cyclone and he and Chronma headed for the mecha bay.

The three cyclone riders approached the guard booth at the

main gate. When they got close enough, they saw that the guard was a Perytonian man more than six feet tall with ten inch horns on his head. His eyes glowed yellow in the darkness. He asked for some identification. When they showed him their REF IDs he waved them through the main gate. To their right they saw the Zentraedi heavy assault pod. The road they were on lead straight to the front door of the main building.

Corporal Hicks from the Horizon-t called up on the radio, "We have more than enough room in the cargo pods for the civilians, but Commander Ferguson is concerned about us coming under attack while they are aboard. He wants Wildcard and DeKirk to go down to the Mecha Bay and see what they have available. He also wants Drakinn to get with whoever is in charge and begin organizing the evacuation."

The group acknowledged their orders and split up. When Jason and Wildcard arrived at the mecha bay, they found Private Brian Stuart preparing his Armored Assault Transport AAT-40 for departure. The vehicle looked somewhat like a heavily armored pickup truck with a turret where the passenger seat should be. He was loading it up with missiles and ammo, and leaving some room for passengers if necessary. When he saw Jason and Wildcard enter the bay, he shouted, "Woo Hoo, we're saved! You guys are here to rescue us, right? I thought Corporal Farino was a little loopy when he ordered us to start preparing for evacuation. I was thinking, 'Evacuate? To where?' But you guys got a ship, right? We're gettin' outa here, aren't we?"

Wildcard laughed, "Yeah, that's right. We're getting' outa here."

The bay had several mecha prepped and ready for launch. Wildcard and Jason saw two battler cyclones, one shadow alpha and one shadow beta. The shadow type mecha's ability to not

be picked up by the Invid's sensors made them very much prized among the warriors of the REF.

Brian said, "I'm so glad you guys showed up, I thought we were going to have to leave some of these mecha behind. One of you can pilot a beta, right?"

Jason said, "You bet!" and at the same time, Wildcard said, "I'll give it a whirl."

Hearing this, Brian replied, "Two beta pilots, huh? That's just the kinda day I've been having. Well you two will have to decide who gets the beta, and for the loser, I have a small consolation prize. Follow me."

With that he walked over to something on the other side of the hangar. The object was about the size of a minivan and covered with a tarp. Brian said with a look of disgust on his face, "As you may know, Mechanical Engineers aren't allowed to pilot mecha in the REF. I however was trained under the RDF where they do allow us to pilot mecha. I had to give it up to join the Expeditionary Force though. Before we left earth, I took my life savings out of the bank and bought this little toy for personal use."

He pulled back the tarp to reveal a logan. The short stubby aircraft had been popular with the armies of the Southern Cross. It wasn't capable of fully transforming into a humanoid battloid mode, but its guardian mode was effective enough for hand to hand fighting on the ground. When transformed, it looked more or less like a jet with arms and legs.

"The civilian model has no weapons, but of course I fixed that. The tri-cannon and the forward lasers are fully functional and I increased the missile capacity. It will hold a dozen medium range missiles. I also beefed up the armor a little. It's my baby, and I'd hate to have to leave it behind. If one of you could pilot

it for me, I'd really appreciate it. I'd fly it myself, but of course the priority is military hardware, not private property. So I have to drive the transport loaded with all the government owned goodies. What do ya say?"

Jason and Wildcard stared at the mecha, not quite sure what to say. Then it dawned on Jason to ask, "How does a private afford such a sweet mecha? And if you were in the service way back in the RDF, how come you are still a private?"

Brian explained, "Well, it's kinda a long story. I'll just give you the highlights. To start, let me just say that I'm no fan of Admiral Rick Hunter. Back on earth, I was a sergeant working aboard the SDF-1. After major maintenance work, I would take the mecha out for a test drive once in a while. That was my favorite part of the job. I'd fly around Macross city and over to Monument. Just loved that. Anyway, when they formed the REF, I volunteered. Always did like an adventure. After I was accepted, Hunter passed that rule that Maintenance techs like me couldn't pilot any more. I was crushed. I suppose the proper thing to do would have been to use the chain of command and protest the new rule. But that's just not my style. I jumped into the nearest logan and flew straight for the Admiral's house. Buzzed his house at fifty feet. Middle of the night, too. Woke him right outa bed for sure. Next day, I got a personal meeting with him and he takes my stripes away and tells me if I screw up one more time, he's gonna kick me outa the REF. Guess I deserved what I got. Anyway, I went out and bought this little toy so I can still fly once in a while. No regulation against that."

"Quite a story," remarked Jason.

Jason and Wildcard noticed a cyclone enter the mecha bay with two people on it. One was in CVR-3 armor and the other was a Perytonian in civilian clothes. First they stopped next to

the beta and both got off and walked over to the beta.

Brian walked over to Robert and Chronma and said, "Sir, I've got the transport ready to go and the alpha and beta are prepped but not connected. As I am so fond of pointing out, it is against REF regulations for mechanics to pilot REF mecha, so I will leave that to you. These two guys are both beta pilots and I think it might be a good idea if you let one of them fly the beta. I'm gonna let the other one fly my logan while I drive the transport. That is, if you approve, sir."

"Sure, sure, sounds good to me," answered Robert.

When Chronma removed the nuke from the cargo box, Brian exclaimed, "Great Googly Moogly! Please keep that thing away from the avionics or I will have to spend six hours recalibrating them! The nuke will be safe in the bomb bay of the beta, but it's not the kind of bomb that you can drop. I'll go get some CVR-3 armor on to give me a little protection from the radiation and get to work securing that thing."

Robert said, "Sure, go get your CVR on, but I think you are overreacting."

Robert then walked over and introduced himself to the two pilots, "Hi guys, I'm Corporal Robert Farino, REF recreation center Chief of Security, welcome to our outpost. Wish it would have been under better circumstances though."

Jason responded to the corporal, "Sorry we couldn't have gotten here sooner. So are we ready to go?"

"We'll be ready soon," Robert informed him.

Outside, Reara used her battlepod's external speaker to introduce herself to Drakinn, "Welcome, I was wondering if any of the REF personnel with you had seen two Peryton children in the area on hover speeders, and if so where?"

Drakinn told her that they hadn't seen any Perytonian kids

tonight. He then asked her, "Could I talk to whomever is in charge around here? I'd like to discuss the evac plans?"

She called Corporal Farino on her radio and asked for his location. He told her he was in the mecha bay. She informed Drakinn and led him there.

After that, she contacted Lt Cmdr Ferguson on the radio and asked him about the Perytonian kids. He replied, "Sure we've seen them. Actually they are right here on the bridge with me. Corporal Hicks is giving them a tour of the Horizon-t. They rode up on land speeders about ten minutes ago and told us about some kind of new mecha they sighted in the area. One of our VT pilots is out investigating the sighting right now. We'll be at your location in ten minutes."

Reara was relieved. Although she generally portrayed a tough exterior, she really did care about the Perytonians.

Corporal Farino called up on the radio and asked Reara for a status report. She replied, "Boss tell the locals their children are fine, and will be in the compound in approximately ten minutes, along with the Lt. Commander and the rest of the REF team."

A smile came across Robert's face and he replied, "Roger that, Reara. I'm glad to have some good news for a change!"

Back at the shuttle, Hicks said, "Private Shanmaris, we are leaving immediately for the rec. center. Please follow and escort us to the landing pad. The two Perytonian kids are from there so they will be riding with us."

Xavier called back, "Roger, shuttle. I've got your back."

Reara detected the Horizon-t as it approached with the alpha flying escort. It moved slowly into place over the large

concrete landing pad next to the mecha bay. The shuttle's thrusters roared as it slowly descended. Reara knew the sound could be deafening if you were outside with no hearing protection. She moved to the landing pad to greet the rescue team. The alpha and the Horizon-t settled down on the pad and the shuttle's engines shut down. The boarding ramp lowered and out come four crewmembers. Reara saw Ragor, the Perytonian personnel manager of the casino, emerge from the main building escorting a group of about twenty civilian workers and their families over to the shuttle.

Ferguson stepped forward yelled up at the imposing figure of Reara's mecha, saying, "I'm Lt. Commander Ferguson, REF Mars Division. I'm in command of the rescue ground forces. There is little time to waste. I need all available REF personnel to meet in the mecha bay for a briefing before we depart. Corporal Hicks and Corporal Hudson will stay at the shuttle to load the passengers, but everyone else should assemble in the mecha bay. The sooner we can start, the better."

Transforming her mecha back to pod mode, Reara entered the mecha bay, parked the pod in her assigned spot, and left the cockpit. She removed her CVR-3 helmet, allowing her waist long orange hair to fall free of the confinement it had been in since 0900 hours. She stretched the stiffness out her joints, and made a quick dash for the restroom. *I'd best hurry*, she thought to herself, *The party is about to begin.*

Ferguson entered the hangar bay and called for the doors to be shut. He then called all REF Personnel around and began to give an update on the situation. Ferguson said, "Just after the recon team left on their cyclones to check out the rec. center, we got a report of an unusual mecha to our west. We sent Private

Summers to investigate, but he has not been heard from in some time now. Private Shanmaris will leave to search for him shortly. Corporal Hicks has decoded a transmission from Captain McKinney. It seems that we may be stuck here for a while. The fold engine was severely damaged in the battle with the Invid fleet and the anti ship cannons were completely destroyed. I assume the ship's anti-fighter turrets are still working. It could be as much as two days before the engines are repaired. Since we can't go home quite yet, they want us to recon the hive. We will stop off at the village to drop off the civilians and then proceed to the mountains where the hive is being constructed. I suggest we load everything salvageable from the mecha bay into the left cargo pod on the Horizon-t. Any capable mecha will fly escort for the shuttle. It is my intention to take out that hive. Are there any questions before we proceed?"

Brian shook his head and said, "What? You're going to take on a hive with a shuttle and a hand full of mecha? That's crazy!"

Xavier added, "He's right boss. We should just take these people to the command ship and avoid unnecessary risks."

Ferguson was visibly upset by the comments. He snapped at the two dissenters, "Look, the decision has been made. We're going after the hive. You guys just shoot Invid and leave the decision making to me. And don't you forget that the REF is in the business of protecting democracy, not practicing it."

Ferguson looked around the group and asked if anyone else had anything to add. Drakinn felt uneasy about speaking after Ferguson's outburst, but he had a legitimate question. He asked, "Sir should Private Shanmaris go alone? I will go with him and be his backup. I am a decent shot."

Ferguson, still perturbed, replied, "No, if he needs backup,

he will call for it."

Drakinn pressed the issue, but the commander cut him off saying, "Private, don't forget the primary goal of this mission is the rescue. You will stay here and protect the Horizon-t. Without it, this mission cannot succeed. I know you fighter pilots think the galaxy revolves around you, but the truth is, you exist to protect this ship, its passengers, and its cargo!"

The room went silent. Robert and Xavier scanned the faces of the others at the briefing, looking for reactions to what was going on. There really wasn't much they could do. Ferguson was a commander and they were obliged to follow his orders.

Ferguson concluded the briefing saying that he wanted to be back in the air in less than thirty minutes. "We're sitting ducks here on the ground. Let's get back to work," he said and turned to leave the hangar.

Ferguson paused, then relented, "Drakinn, once we have finished loading everything salvageable from the mecha bay onto the Horizon-t, you may go to assist Private Shanmaris in his search for Private Summers. I guess he probably shouldn't go out alone. I won't make that mistake again."

Drakinn replied, "Thanks, sir. You won't regret it. I'll make sure he comes back in one piece."

Once the briefing was over Xavier did as he was told and helped with the loading of the shuttle. When that was done, he asked for permission to depart. He and Drakinn departed with Xavier's mecha in guardian mode and Drakinn riding his cyclone. They headed southwest with Drakinn driving at top speed and Xavier flying high like a guardian angel keeping a protective eye on his partner. Fortunately, their destination was only about twenty miles away, and it only took a few minutes to arrive in the area.

*Although the REF intelligence community had discovered that the Invid's sensors were capable of detecting protoculture, as evidenced by the development of the Shadow versions of the Alpha and Beta fighters, it was not widely known among the troops. Even the development of the gasoline engine for the Cyclone to use in motorcycle mode was not intended to give it any stealth capability. The true purpose for the gasoline engine was to conserve protoculture power cells, which were becoming increasingly more scarce. It was not until REF forces gained significant experience fighting the Invid on Earth that the knowledge would become common and the tactic of powering down mecha in order to be overlooked by Invid patrols became widespread.*

*History of the Third Robotech War, Vol III*

## **Chapter Four**

**About a kilometer out from the field of flowers, Alex** landed his alpha and rode the rest of the way on his cyclone so that he could better avoid detection. He also turned off his radio so the sound of an unexpected call wouldn't alert the enemy to his presence. The terrain was mostly grassy plains, but there was an occasional hill, which afforded some cover. He snuck up to the top of the hill closest to the field of flowers. It was dark,

and difficult to see anything in the starlight. Apparently Perytonian eyes must be more adapted to the dark nights on this moonless world. Eventually, he spotted what he was looking for. The mecha was definitely humanoid, two legs, and two arms. There didn't seem to be any light sources coming from it (no cockpit lighting that Alex could see). It was definitely not moving at all.

The flowers in the field had grown dense and were about waist high. Alex approached the motionless mecha on foot. When he got about one hundred meters from it, he heard someone rustling around in the flowers nearby. He could see by the starlight that the mecha was an Invid royal command battloid. The RCB was the latest in Invid mecha technology. He remembered sitting at intelligence briefings and hearing about them, but this was the first time he had actually seen one. It was much taller and more humanoid shaped than anything else the Invid used. It had two thrusters on its back that could propel it through the air at great speed. One arm had a large cannon built into the forearm. The cockpit was enclosed with a transparent substance that looked like glass, but was obviously much stronger. The pilot was not in it. A rustling of the flower bushes alerted Alex that there was someone else walking in the field. It had to be the pilot.

In the distance, Alex heard the low rumble of an alpha's engines. He knew that the RCB pilot must be able to hear the same thing. By the loud rustling of the leaves, he guessed that the pilot had begun to run toward the RCB.

Flying low, Xavier came across the empty alpha that he recognized as Alex's. He could see that the cyclone was missing, but it was difficult to tell which direction he rode off in. The field where the unidentified mecha had been spotted must be

somewhere close.

Xavier tried radioing for Alex, but got no response. Then he called Drakinn and had him ride his cyclone over and take a closer look at the abandoned alpha. Drakinn walked around the mecha and eventually found the tire tracks from Alex's cyclone.

"Looks like he drove off to the west," Drakinn told Xavier. "I'll follow the tire tracks, you fly ahead and see if you can spot him."

In the field of Invid Flowers, Alex heard the jet noise from the approaching alpha grow louder. He thought, *they're gonna ruin everything!*

The sound of the pilot rushing through the waist high flowers grew nearer. It seemed as if they must be only a few feet away. Then Alex saw the RCB pilot as she passed by, heading quickly for the cockpit of her mecha. She was slender and tall with long purple hair, dark burgundy eyes and a seemingly skintight flight suit. She looked perfectly human. She was startled by the sudden realization that she was not alone and recoiled when she perceived Alex's fully armored form only meters away from her.

Alex lunged forward and tried to grab her, but she was too quick. She broke into a full run. Alex was nearly on top of her as she approached the humanoid mecha. Just as he thought he might be able to grab her, she jumped into her seat and the transparent canopy closed around her. The thrusters on the back of the RCB roared to life and she rocketed skyward. The hot blast of air from the RCB's engines knocked Alex to the ground. When he stood up, he could see the twin blue-white flames of the RCB's rockets against the starry background of the night sky. Alex could tell that she was headed directly toward the

sound of the approaching alpha.

Back at the casino Corporal Farino stopped Ferguson as he was about to board the shuttle. He pulled him aside and they had a private conversation. Robert was not particularly happy about Ferguson's plan to attack the hive, but he recognized the futility of arguing about it. Now, all he could do was try to minimize the casualties, and he thought he had a good idea of how to do that.

Robert said, "We might have a chance to destroy the hive without having to risk our entire team. A while back we confiscated a Robotech Masters' nuke, apparently a leftover from their last war here. If we could have it somehow inserted into the hive the nuke could then be set to a time delay, enough time for whoever inserted it to get clear of the blast radius, and then boom! We have ourselves a nice oven full of escargot. My shadow alpha and the shadow beta could come in very handy to assist with that operation, also I don't know if you are aware of how much firepower the ABP-Z4 Private Rearsa is piloting really has, it easily could defend the shuttle with one alpha and a cyclone or two, while the shadows do their thing."

Ferguson looked pleased and replied, "That gives us a definite advantage. And this is just the kind of thing that might get me promoted to Captain. Who knows, they might just give me my own Garfish, or even an Ikazuchi. Yep, that would look real good on my record. If we play our cards right, we might come out of this as heroes. Unless something unforeseen happens, we'll go with your plan. But don't mention anything around the civilians. I'll brief the rest of the team when the time is right."

Ferguson came away from the meeting with a grin on his

face that made everyone else wonder what was going on.

Reara stayed in her assault pod while the loading was going on and kept a vigilant eye on the surrounding terrain, especially the water.

The Horizon-t cargo pods were loaded with the civilians in the right pod and the extra cyclones, four in all, in the left. Brian drove his AAT-40 into the left cargo pod and secured it. Last, a few extra supplies and some ammunition were loaded and the operation was complete.

Before departing, Robert and Reara returned to their quarters to get some personal items and then returned to the Horizon-t. The preparations were complete and the shuttle was ready to depart. Everyone strapped into his or her respective mecha, Reara into her pod, Wildcard into the shadow beta, Robert into the shadow alpha, Jason into the modified logan.

Ferguson addressed the team, "For those of you in heavy mecha, fly escort for us. The rest, load up. We're ready to lift off."

Robert offered, "Wildcard take notice, the bomb bays of the beta have cargo and not bombs, you have your full complement of missiles though, hope we don't have to use them."

He then adjusted the restraint straps of his shadow alpha's seat, and affectionately patted the right side of the control panel display (his personal superstition whenever he flew the alpha) while he went through his pre flight checklist. "All systems green, let's roll!"

The shuttle lifted off and began to head slowly to the west. The rest of the formation climbed away from the REF Recreation Facility. For Robert and Brian the evacuation meant the end of what would probably end up being the best assignment they would ever get in their REF careers. For Reara,

however, it was a welcome change. Life on Peryton had been too quiet for the fiery tempered Zentraedi warrior. She had longed to fight Invid, and now she felt she might explode from all the anticipation. Her time had finally come. For the first time in her REF career, she felt she might actually be where she belonged.

The formation passed over the great forest. The sun began to rise and they could begin to make out the hundreds of kilometers of dense vegetation, with tall trees forming a solid green canopy rolling by underneath the formation. In the distance the village could be seen with the snow topped mountains beyond. The shuttle's long-range sensors picked up Invid patrols flying the length of the mountain range. Ferguson said over the radio, "We're picking up some patrols over the mountains, but they aren't reacting to our presence. We will leave them be until we can unload these civilians."

Just then, they received a call from Xavier. He reported finding Alex's abandoned mecha. "I've tried to contact him, but I'm not getting any reply."

Robert offered to go assist in the search, and Ferguson, grudgingly agreed. "As soon as we are on the ground and we get that Battlepod unloaded, you are cleared off," he said.

The Horizon-t set down in the center of town, and the doors opened to let the Perytonians out. High overhead, Robert's alpha went streaking off toward Alex's position, his afterburners glowing brightly in the early morning light.

It took about ten minutes to get the civilians and all their stuff unloaded. Jason landed his logan near the shuttle and climbed out of the cockpit. His headache had returned, and he was desperate for some relief. He approached Hudson as he was ushering passengers off the shuttle and asked, "You got some

ibuprofen or something? My head's killin' me."

"Yeah," said Hudson, digging into a flight suit pocket and tossing a small bottle to Jason. "I always carry some on long missions like these."

Jason popped two pills into his mouth and swallowed them, then threw the bottle back to Hudson. "Thanks, you're a life saver," he said. In the distance, he heard the radio in his logan come to life.

Corporal Hicks warned the team, "Bogies inbound! Approaching from 280 at 5000 feet! Five total. Tight formation, moving slow. Approximately 50 miles out and closing. ETA 20 minutes."

Jason hopped back into his mecha and lifted off. Hudson unloaded the last of the civilians and closed up the cargo bay.

"Think they've detected us?" asked Brian.

*I hope so*, thought Reara.

Back to the southwest of the rec. center, Robert was still quite a distance out when his sensors detected Xavier's alpha flying low to the ground. He detected the abandoned alpha and Drakinn riding slowly in the same direction Xavier was flying. He also detected a bogie heading straight for Xavier. He tried to warn him, but it was all happening too fast.

Xavier overheard the warning but he had no time to reply, he also detected the approaching mecha. He was taken off guard and the RCB got off the first shot, firing a massive volley of missiles at his alpha.

Robert's sensors detected the missile launch, but he was too far out of range to do anything as they streaked toward Xavier.

Xavier, however, fired his gun pod into the volley of missiles in a desperate attempt to shoot them down, but only hit

one of them. The remaining missiles struck his mecha and caused massive damage to his alpha fighter. Sensors began to malfunction and all his instruments flickered on and off intermittently. The cockpit filled with the sound of warning sirens and malfunction alarms. Miraculously, he was able to keep the alpha in the air.

Robert transmitted, "Xavier, are you all right?"

Xavier answered, "My mecha's pretty well damaged! Drakinn, I could use some backup!"

Drakinn called back, "I don't have a shot! The thing's too low and fast! No line of sight!"

Robert yelled, "Xavier, try to lead that thing back toward me! Drakinn, shed the cyclone and get that alpha airborne!"

"Right, I'm on it!" called Drakinn.

"Coming your way!" said Xavier

Robert dropped low, trying to keep the RCB from detecting him as he approached. He knew his shadow systems would keep him from showing up on the enemy sensors, but he could still be seen. Xavier's smoking alpha screamed overhead, with the RCB in pursuit. Robert popped up and fired on the RCB with his GU-XX gun pod. The RCB deftly avoided the first shot and spun around to face Robert. As it took aim at him, Robert got off another shot. This time it found its mark. Sparks flew at the RCB took the hit in the left leg, but it didn't seem to be significantly damaged.

Drakinn radioed the Horizon-t, "Shuttle, this is Corporal Drakinn, we're being engaged, taking heavy damage. Send backup immediately!"

The reply came from Corporal Hicks, "Sorry, but we can't send any assistance right now. We've got bogies inbound to our position."

Drakinn felt helpless as he drove his cyclone toward the abandoned alpha, with the battle taking place high in the sky and out of reach, at least for the moment. With the team divided, and both groups under attack, he thought, *damn, I wonder if they planned this!*

Robert accelerated toward the RCB and fired a volley of four missiles, but the RCB didn't dodge. Instead, it held up its forearm shield and took the blast, firing four missiles back at Robert. The RCB's forearm shield was nearly destroyed by the missiles and the body began to show some wear, but it didn't seem to be slowed down at all by the damage.

Robert, however, had been taken by surprise by the gutsy move and took the full force of the missile attack. His alpha was heavily damaged, and he thought it might fall out of the sky at any minute. He considered ejecting, but decided to stay with it. He thought, *I can't lose this fighter, it's crucial to the plan!*

At the village, Hudson gave the team an update on the inbound mecha. "Looks like four shock troopers and a... Oh crap, you remember those RCB things intel briefed us about, well they got one!"

Reara whispered a warrior's prayer. Not only was she about to see the action she had been craving, but it looked as if it would be a tough fight too. The enemy came quickly into range and she took advantage of the long range of her pod's powerful weapons. As she fired her first shot she cried on an open radio channel "Reaper of souls, collect thy bounty!!" She shot at the RCB from extreme range as the formation of Invid approached. It was a gamble, but it paid off.

The RCB attempted to dodge, but wasn't quick enough. The pilot simply didn't expect anything in the REF arsenal to be able

to reach out and hit it so far away.. The RCB took a devastating blow to the chest and moved away to the north at extreme speed. The shock troopers pressed the attack, even without their leader. They swooped down on the defenders. One shock trooper took a shot at Reara; two others took shots at Jason. The last attempted to fly straight through the battle toward the shuttle.

Back at the shuttle, Brian jumped into his AAT-40 and drove it out of the cargo pod. The shuttle began to lift off as soon as he was clear.

Jason used the forearm shields on his logan to parry the shot from the first shock trooper but he was hit by a blast from the second. Fortunately, the damage was light and he fired back. His aim was true. The first trooper was hit dead center causing massive damage. It was stopped in his path and fell to the ground. He could see that it wasn't dead, though, and it quickly stood back up, apparently no longer able to fly.

Reara maneuvered her pod, now in tank mode, out of the way as a blast narrowly missed her. She fired, and the trooper came flaming to the ground, and didn't get back up. She then fired a volley of missiles at the trooper who was attempting to get by the team and attack the shuttle. The missiles streaked toward the target. The shock trooper dove for the ground and pulled out at the last minute, causing the missiles to impact the ground where they exploded. The shock trooper continued on course for the shuttle.

Reara transmitted, "You boys take the stray, I've got these two!" Then she switched her cannons to a slightly less powerful setting, which had a faster rate of fire and attacked the nearby airborne shock trooper, but missed. Then she took aim at the grounded shock trooper. This time her aim was better and the Invid was struck by both particle beams and disintegrated. The

Invid she missed returned fire and Reara dodged the blast, but only by inches.

Wildcard took off after the Invid which was streaking away from the battle, straight toward the shuttle. Hoping to stop him before he could reach the Horizon-t, he fired two missiles at it. The missiles streaked toward their target, but the Invid turned and fired at the volley. Unfortunately for the trooper, he only hit one missile and was struck by the other. He was heavily damaged and seemed to have decided that there was no way he could outrun Wildcard. Instead, he stopped and fired at his attacker.

Wildcard threw up his beta's forearm shields to block the Invid's shot and in one fluid motion fired back with his foreword mounted cannon. His forearm shield took some damage, but he took a heavy toll on the Invid as well. His shot hit the Invid dead center. Heavily damaged, it fell to the ground, and exploded.

Robert called the Horizon-t asking for backup. "We're taking heavy damage here, I don't know how much longer we can hold out!" yelled Robert.

Hicks did the only thing he could, he called the Roosevelt. "Roosevelt, we need help down here. Request you launch the alert alpha. Transmitting coordinates." The Roosevelt replied that the alert alpha would be launched immediately.

Hicks let Robert know, "Corporal Farino and team, help is on the way. The alert alpha has been launched from the Ikazuchi. It should be arriving at your position any minute now."

Corporal Nape was a recon alpha pilot aboard the Ikazuchi Command carrier in orbit. After the battle with the Invid fleet, he was put on alert, awaiting an order from the captain to launch in support of the ground forces. Everything had been so calm

down on the planet for the last few hours. Occasionally, he monitored the radio transmissions between the team members trying to keep up on the situation and not be taken by surprise when the time came to launch, if it came at all.

He hated being on alert. You had to stay ready to launch in minutes if the word came. That meant no chow hall, no gym, just sitting around waiting for the “Magic” call that would be his authorization to launch, and it almost never came. Often it was difficult to even stay awake.

Today, he was listening in on the tactical channel and heard much excited communications between the team members. From what he could tell, they were divided. Some near a Perytonian village where the Horizon-t had come under attack, but they seemed to be holding their own against their assailants. The other group was searching for Alex Summers. They had not found him, but they did find another bad guy, which was inflicting severe damage on them.

The order finally came. Captain McKinney's voice boomed over the intercom saying, "Magic, Magic, Magic! Launch he alert alpha immediately!"

Even though he had been expecting the call, his heart skipped as the excitement of the moment hit him. He called back to the bridge, saying “Alert alpha acknowledges, launching ASAP!”

Nape ran full out across the hangar bay to his mecha and launched in record time. Soon, he was descending toward the planet. Combat was imminent.

Drakinn finally got out of his cyclone and boarded the empty alpha. He powered it up and accelerated toward the battle. He fired on the RCB with his GU-XX gun pod, but again

it deftly avoided the shot.

Xavier was trying his best to get in position for a missile shot when he looked up to see a brilliant white trail of an alpha entering the atmosphere at extreme speed directly overhead. Moments later, from high above come a volley of missiles streaking out of the sky toward the RCB. It was surprised by the attack from above and the missiles struck it right in the head and upper torso. The RCB fell out of the sky streaming black smoke behind it. It hit the ground with tremendous force, and stayed there. It seemed immobilized.

Over the radio came a frenzied transmission from the shuttle. Hicks was saying, "It's coming this way! It's coming this way!"

Drakinn quickly asked, "I think you guys can handle this form here. I'm going to see if I can get to the shuttle in time to help out." Robert cleared him to depart and he took off in his newly acquired alpha to find out what was threatening the Horizon-t.

At the village, the RCB had re-appeared. Brian said, "I got it, I got it! Firing!" Streaking in from the north at mach two, the RCB was on an intercept course for the shuttle. As it lined up a shot at the shuttle's engines, Brian fired the cannon on his AAT-40 and the RCB made no attempt to dodge, taking the full force of the blow right in the chest. The RCB continued its charge and fired a massive volley of missiles at the shuttle's engines! The missiles struck home and the shuttle came crashing to the ground in flames.

Reara was still engaged with the last of the shock troopers. She took another shot at her foe. This time she hit it, but it was a glancing blow. The Invid was knocked off its feet, but it got

back up again and fired. Rearsa dodged the shock trooper's fire and blasted its sensor eye with her forearm cannons. It dropped dead instantly.

From atop a building in the village, Chronma stretched out his arms and sky filled with dark storm clouds which began to swirl over the RCB. A bolt of blue-white lightning streaked from the heavens toward it. It tried to dodge, but not even an RCB is faster than lightning. The bolt struck the RCB in the chest with a brilliant white flash. Sparks flew inside the pilot compartment. It changed course. It was headed back toward Brian and Chronma to exact its revenge.

The RCB charged toward Brian's AAT-40 at high speed. Just before he got there, Jason flew over the AAT and hovered his logan protectively between the RCB and the AAT, lowering his left wing to shield Brian and spraying the RCB with his E-20 gun pod.

Again the RCB made no attempt to dodge, he took the blast directly to the chest and slammed into Jason's logan, knocking it to the ground where it rolled to a stop about fifty yards away. The RCB then grabbed Brian right out of his seat in the AAT-40 with its left claw while keeping the forearm cannon trained on Jason's logan. Rearsa headed for them at full speed. When she arrived, she saw the hostage situation that had developed.

Drakinn at this point was approaching the site of the crashed shuttle, he radioed to notify that he was entering the area. What he saw when he arrived was amazing. The shuttle was a pile of smoking wreckage and the RCB had Brian in its left hand and was pointing its weapon at Jason's logan, yet had not fired on him. Jason asked if anyone had any suggestions.

Rearsa came into the area at high speed. Steering clear of Jason, she fired a tremendous blast from her cannons, hoping to

incapacitate the enemy.

The RCB attempted to shield itself with its right arm, and took only a glancing blow. However, the glancing blow from Reara's massive cannons was still powerful enough to spin the RCB 180 degrees around and knock it to the ground. It got back up and took off to the west, firing a parting gift of six missiles at Reara. It seemed heavily damaged and left a thick black smoke trail.

Reara fired her cannons into the swarm of missiles as they approached, and the blast destroyed the entire volley.

Jason found himself temporarily blinded by the explosion, but otherwise unhurt. He counted himself fortunate however because he knew that if he had been just a few feet closer to the target, he would probably have been dead.

As the RCB streaked away with Brian in hand, Wildcard yelled over the radio, "Reara you idiot. He hadn't made a move yet! Maybe he was going to give in! You could have gotten someone killed... Next time, think before you leap...." but before he could finish the sentence, Reara, sensing that the RCB was on its last leg, fired at the fleeing mecha. "I think I can stop him!" she yelled.

She was right, the shot disabled the RCB's thrusters and it fell to the ground. Upon hitting the ground, the RCB rolled several times because of the speed it had been traveling at. The impact killed the pilot, and unfortunately Brian perished in the crash along with him.

In his cockpit, Jason had shielded himself with his mecha's arms while his blindness passed. It quickly did, and he then got on his radio and asked what had just happened.

*That was the first time any of us had seen a Royal Command Battloid. Intel had briefed us on the possible existence of such things, but I was shocked by the firepower they packed. Generally, Invid mecha can't go toe to toe with an alpha, they depend on numerical superiority, but this one was different. It was easily a match for anything we were flying. I'm sure glad the Regent didn't have any of these, or we wouldn't be fighting the Regess for the Earth now, we'd be fighting the Regent for our survival.*

*From the Collected Journals of Commander Robert Farino*

## **Chapter Five**

**Back at the field of flowers, Robert carefully circled** around the crashed RCB and gently landed the shadow alpha next to where Drakinn had left his cyclone. He then radioed Xavier and told him, "keep looking for Alex and bring him back here, stay alert just in case I need your help in a hurry"

Next, Robert shut down the alpha. He jumped down from the canopy and reconfigured the cyclone into battloid mode as he activated it. Fortunately, Drakinn's cyclone had been a VR-41 Saber type. As he approached the seemingly lifeless RCB, he

snapped open his left CADS, the sword like cutting instrument housed within the cyclone's arm produced a low humming sound as Robert climbed on top of the Invid battloid. He looked for the cockpit entrance and worked his blade into the crevices, finally breaking open the canopy. As soon as he opened it, he closed down the CADS system and offered his outstretched hand to the pilot within. She was pointing her energy pistol right at the visor of Robert's helmet, but he told her, "The way I see it, you've got two choices. One, you can shoot me, and maybe even kill me if you get a lucky shot, and then my buddy in the alpha blows you into a hundred flaming bits. Or two, you can come along with us without making a fuss, in which case, I promise you will be treated fairly. So what's it gonna be?"

She then looked up into the sky, where Nape's alpha was circling overhead and decided there was no hope of escape. Realizing her defeat, she lowered her head in shame and handed the weapon over to Robert, to which he replied, "Ah, number two it is. Good call."

After a short while, Xavier came back with Alex, Robert climbed up to the cockpit of the shadow alpha and restrained the Invid pilot. He then told Alex in a very stern tone of voice, "Look at these two fighters, private! If you had decided to grace us with an answer to our radio calls they might not have all that black smoke pouring out of them. That was irresponsible, dangerous and frankly very stupid on your part. Now help Xavier retrieve what's left of that battloid and let's get back to the rest of the group before any more problems show up."

Alex started to defend himself, saying "Look, corporal, I had to leave my alpha so I could sneak up on that RCB without being noticed. I turned off my radio so the RCB pilot who was out of her mecha wouldn't hear it. So, if you had just had a little

more faith in me, and not shown up flying these loud mecha, I probably would have captured her without a fight. As it was, she heard you approach and ran back to her mecha and proceeded to kick your butt! So now whose fault is it?"

Robert began to say something, but stopped before a word had come out of his mouth. He scratched his chin and then said, "Well if you put it that way, I guess we were both at fault."

"You little.... You are the only one at fault here!" yelled Alex.

"Not true, if you had just told us what you were up to before turning off your radio, we wouldn't have come blasting in here looking for you, now would we?"

Robert lowered his tone and continued, "Alex, just don't let this happen again, we cannot afford to risk our resources unnecessarily, you are a good pilot and we need you. For now, at least we'll have her to question later, so this is not a total loss. Now let's go."

Alex took the criticism in stride and asked, "So, who's gonna give me a ride now? Drakinn took my alpha and split. Now all I got is this cyclone."

Xavier volunteered, "I'll carry him. It won't be a problem. What do you want to do with the wreckage? Blow it up, or take it with us? I don't know if the Invid can salvage anything from it, but I don't wanna take any chances."

Robert explained that he would carry Alex so Xavier would be free to destroy the RCB. After which, they flew to the location where the rest of the group was searching in vain for survivors in the wreckage of the crashed Horizon-t. Robert landed his guardian mode shadow alpha and climbed out with the prisoner.

He was shocked by the devastation. He noticed the

damaged jeep that had been Brian's. "What happened here?" he asked. Reara, Jason and Drakinn each filled in their pieces of the puzzle.

In an accusatory tone, Wildcard said, "Reara fired the shot that killed Brian! What are we going to do about it?"

Reara shot back, "I was trying to save him!"

Wildcard got right in Reara's face and said, "Your problem is that you shoot first and think later, if at all."

Reara finally had enough. She grabbed Wildcard by the chest plate of his CVR-3 armor and the fight was on.

Robert and Drakinn sprang into action, pulling the two combatants off each other. Robert could not allow this to continue. "Listen you two," he said. "We can't start fighting among ourselves. We've got a mission to complete. Our very survival is at stake. Now I don't want to hear anymore about this till we are safely out of this mess, understood?"

"Yes, sir," they both replied in unison.

"We'll look into these events once we have completed our mission," Robert continued. "Right now, we need to stay focused."

With Ferguson gone, he was now in command. It had been less than an hour, and he was already feeling the pressure that came with that command. It was a lot to take in, and he walked away from the group to collect his thoughts for a moment.

Drakinn offered to try to get some information out of the Invid pilot. He had been trained in interrogation. Robert agreed, saying, "Yeah, you do that."

Drakinn took her a short distance away from the rest of the group and began to ask her some questions.

She readily shared her name. With pride she identified herself as Princess Gia, Royal Command Battloid pilot for the

Invid.

Drakinn began, "What is your designation and why are you working for the Invid?"

Princess Gia replied, "I *am* an Invid! I am third in command of my forces on this planet and I am certainly not human."

Drakinn, never having seen a humanoid Invid before was visibly stunned by her statement. He took a minute to look her over. The Regent had no such beings in his service. He noticed an injury, some small scratches on the back of her hand. Indeed, the blood was a dark blue-green. After a moment, he accepted her statement and began to question her again.

"Who are your superiors?"

"The Regess herself appointed my superiors, and I will not betray them by telling you anything about them."

"The Regess is who commands you? Not the Regent?"

"That's right, I care not for that spineless anachronism. For all I know, he is dead."

"What is your mission on this planet?"

Gia decided that it was best to give some answers but keep them extremely vague, thereby at the same time satisfying this human's desire for information, giving away as little *valuable* information as possible and avoiding whatever unpleasant means the humans might use to motivate her to talk.

"This planet must be taken for the Regess' plans. That is all you need know," Gia said.

"What are her plans?" Drakinn continued.

"You wouldn't understand it if I told you. She sees all and knows all. It is pointless to resist. What can you hope to do here? And are you even sure that you should?"

"What is the purpose and size of the hive?"

"The hive is our center of operations on this planet, but I suspect you already knew that. Haven't you any better questions?"

"How many more like you are on this planet?"

"Like me? None. The others are... different."

"How many others?! Don't try my patience! I could turn you over to the Zentraedi!"

The threat of turning her over to that female Zentraedi truly frightened Gia. However, she had caught something in Robert's eye that led her to believe that he would not be that cruel. A hunch was all she had to go on, but she played it.

"Your superior promised me fair treatment. Don't try his patience!"

"What is the size of the Invid force on this planet?"

Of course she wouldn't answer that question, but her stonewalling was obviously beginning to try Drakinn's patience. She felt that if she didn't give him *something* and soon, that things might escalate and she didn't want to find out exactly how far Robert would let things go. *I will give him some bait, to lead him in a direction wherein I can give some answers*, she thought.

"After our unexpected battle with your ships above the planet, we are perhaps too few to complete the mission. You humans, however, are of little consequence. The Masters are coming. Stopping them is what truly matters."

"What is your mission and why is it so important?"

"I do not pretend to understand the Regess' means, but she has detected that this planet is of extreme importance to the Masters. If they take it, it will mean dire consequences for the entire galaxy."

"When will the masters arrive?"

"I do not know. I suspect they may already be here. The locals claim to have seen them."

"Where?"

"To the south. Perhaps on another continent. The fabric of hyperspace has been worn thin near this world. Something large repeatedly folds space here, since ancient times. I suspect it has something to do with the Masters."

"Where near this world?"

"Return me to my people so that I may save them and perhaps yours as well. I will answer no further questions."

"You are done when I say so!"

"If you harm me, you will pay at the hands of my brother. He is a warrior of much greater skill and cunning than any of you human filth."

"So you have another brother besides the one who was killed?"

"I felt his death, but mine is a large family that spans the galaxy. That was my brother Demmik. My brother Pan is more powerful. He will kill you all."

"I want the spatial co-ordinates for the fold disturbance."

"I don't have any co-ordinates! What, do you think I carry that kind of information around in my pocket? It is near here. Ask your Robotech ship to scan for it."

"Do not mock me! Is Pan in charge of this planet?"

"He knows what you have done and he will kill you for it."

"How does he know?"

"We can sense the death of our kindred. And I called for assistance before I crashed. It may be too late for you! He may already be nearby! Foolish humans! Release me!"

Drakinn laughed at her suggestion and said, "Not a chance." He then led her over to the others who had been

watching from a distance. He shared with them what he had learned.

Robert gave Captain McKinney the details of the interrogation. The captain replied, "Sensors show the hive to be only partially complete. You are ordered to proceed to the hive as soon as practical. Repairs on the fold engines are nearing completion. I want that Hive reconnoitered before we head out. That means we are waiting on you to go home. As for the team in general, I don't know whether to give them a medal or throw them in the brig. Needless to say, no further loss of life will be tolerated. Recon the hive and call for evac. We will send a Horizon-t for pickup when we receive your call." Robert acknowledged his orders and signed off.

Corporal Nape reported to Robert, who was the apparent leader of the ground forces after the loss of the Horizon-t crew. He said, "I am Corporal Nape, my orders are to report to you and assist in your operation."

Robert, glad to have a new, less fatigued warrior in the group, said, "Pleased to meet you Corporal, wish it could have been under better circumstances. Right now I am going to need all the help you can give me."

*Upon capturing Princess Gia, my first thought was to wonder why a human would be working for the Invid. I had no Idea at the time that she actually was an Invid. I also thought about how useful she would be for the information she could provide. I had no idea at the time just how valuable she would be to us. Nor how important she would become to me personally.*

*From the Collected Journals of Commander Robert Farino*

## **Chapter Six**

**The day had worn on till Umbra was high overhead.** The silhouette of the mountains could be seen on the western horizon. Somewhere hidden in those mountains was the Invid Hive.

Robert called for Rera to take the prisoner in her mecha, since it had room for up to three passengers. He also warned her, "I'm making this a direct order, she is not to be harmed! Understood?"

Rera replied, with an obviously false look of surprise and a hint of a smile, "Of course not! What kind of monster do you think I am?"

"A Zentraedi," said Robert under his breath as he walked off.

The group headed out, traveling low and moving together at the top speed of the slowest vehicle. When they got within 250 miles of the hive, Robert called for the group to stop and take cover.

He explained, "We're going to power down and hide. We'll take turns keeping watch while the others sleep out the day. We've been going for 30 hours straight and people will start making mistakes if they don't get some sleep..."

"*Start making mistakes?*", commented Alex, immediately regretting the comment.

In a harsh tone, Robert retorted, "There will be a time to deal with the events of the last day, but now is not the right time to bring it up." Then he broke into an absolute yell, "The last thing we need right now is to start pointing fingers and assigning blame! I don't want to hear another word about it till we are back aboard the ship, understood?"

Alex gave a crisp "Yes sir!"

Robert shook off his rage, realizing that it was most likely a sign of his extreme fatigue and continued his briefing. "We all need some rest. We'll take turns sleeping during the day. We could also use the cover of night to help with the recon. Nape will take first watch since he is the least worn out of the group."

Nape then offered to check out the damaged mecha using his knowledge of veritech systems. He was no mechanic, but he had learned a lot from the maintenance guys in the hangar. He had put his time on Alert to use over the last year, learning anything he could from the maintainers. Of course, several team members took him up on his offer.

Robert briefed everyone about what would happen when the sun went down. "Under cover of night, the two shadows will get closer to the hive, remaining close to the ground and going slow to make sure they do not stumble into a patrol or a trap. All radios will be kept on, to warn of any trouble on either side. If discovered, we run, hide and to try to approach later from another direction."

Shran, Baz and Dakon watched from the safety of the Tirolian transport ship as an assault carrier filled with bioroids sped toward the Invid hive to the north. They stood on platforms around a Protoculture cap, which resembled a giant mushroom six feet across, floating in mid air with the three Robotech Masters clustered around it. From here, they could observe the day's events.

Nearby, in the same room, the three Clone Masters asked what should be done about a new sensor contact.

"My Lords, sensors detect a small group of human mecha near the objective area. Shall we vector the assault carrier to intercept them?" asked Drash, one of the three Clone Masters.

"What do we know of the humans and the capabilities of their mecha?" asked Shran.

"Very little, my lord" replied Drash. "However, from what we have observed so far, we can be certain that they are no friends of the Invid."

"True! Perhaps we can use this to our advantage," exclaimed Baz.

"Yes, vector the assault carrier to their position. We will offer them the chance to join our attack on the Hive," commanded Dakon.

"But my lord, I would think that an alliance with the humans would be incompatible with our long term goals," remarked Kondar, another of the Clone Masters.

"The alliance will be short lived. If they die in the attack on the hive, we shall be rid of them. If some of them live, they should be easy to dispatch in their weakened state," explained Shran.

"We shall do as you command, Masters," the three Clone

Masters answered in unison.

After their short briefing, the team settled in for some rest. Nape started tinkering with the team's mecha. Approximately three hours into his tinkering, he was disturbed by a message from the Ikazuchi.

"Ground Party, this is the Roosevelt. You have a large bogie inbound. ETA fifteen minutes. Bogie is currently over the sea to the south and approaching at high speed. Target is approximately 400 feet long and moving at mach two!"

The rest of the group was awakened, rather rudely, by Nape yelling, "Inbound bogie reported! Will reach our position in five mikes!" Then Nape began powering up his mecha.

The team quickly powered up their mecha too and made ready for the battle. Drakinn suited up in his CVR-3 armor and powered up his cyclone, transformed it around himself into armor mode and extended his CADS system's blades.

Alex jerked up from his sleeping position, pistol in hand. "What the hell?" he exclaimed. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and saw the others running towards their mecha. "Man, I was having the best dream!" Jumping to his feet Alex pulled his boots on and grabbed his bedroll, throwing it in the back of his fighter before jumping into the cockpit. *Why can't they just leave us alone long enough for a nap!?* he thought to himself.

Wildcard came over the radio, "Wildcard here, hey boss, do we still have time to move out un-noticed? If it's the Robotech Masters, they might be heading for the Invid hive... Let them kill each other, weaken each other. We'll take on the winner, and become winners ourselves. What do you say?"

"Just stand by for now," Robert said.

Jason couldn't stand the suspense of waiting. He asked

Robert if he could try and get a visual on the bogie. Robert agreed, and Jason was off. He closed to within ten miles and from there he could easily make out its shape. It was a Robotech Master assault carrier. A small troop carrier used by the Robotech Masters to move their army of bioroids quickly from place to place. It was extremely fast, heavily armored, and just as well armed.

Jason and the rest of the team heard a strange, almost synthetic voice over their radios. The unusual voice said, "Humans, we have no quarrel with you. Your assistance in disposing of the Invid fleet in orbit above this planet was much appreciated. We go now to complete the destruction of our common foe. If you will join us, you will not be harmed. At least not till the Invid have been driven from this world. After that, I can promise nothing."

Reara heard the Masters message over her radio. Her prisoner, Princess Gia, yelled from the back of the pod, "Do not help them! They will destroy you! They care about nothing but power and domination. Once your usefulness is over, they will surely turn on you! Don't you see that? But you... You are Zentraedi. Of course you will trust your creators, and millions will pay for your mistake."

"Boss, this could be just the turn of luck we need!" exclaimed Jason.

Robert contacted the Roosevelt to make sure they copied the Masters' transmission. Then, Robert called Drakinn on the radio and said, "Close down those CADS blades until you really need them, they will suck your cyclone's power if you don't use them sparingly, and we might not have the luxury of a refuel until this mess is over."

With that, Drakinn retracted his cads and stood by for

further orders, sarcastically saying, "Till I really need them? You mean this doesn't qualify?"

A reply came in from the carrier, "Ground Team, Command Carrier here. Yes we copied that transmission. We are leaving the decision about aiding the Masters in their assault on the hive up to your team leader. But be advised, the Invid pilots story about a hyperspace disturbance in the area actually panned out. There is a disturbance in the gravity field approximately twenty-five thousand miles from the planet. It appears to have been caused by hundreds of large-scale space folds occurring in the same location over an extended period of time. Proceed with caution, Roosevelt out."

Robert said, "Reara, patch me through to our Invid guest."

She did, and he proceeded to question her. "Is there anything else we might need to know about your quarrel with the Masters? Any information you provide to us will help me decide which of you is the lesser of the two evils. It might even help your race survive this encounter. Go ahead, convince us that the Masters are more of a threat than the Invid are."

She replied, "I doubt that I could convince you of our trustworthiness. Not after we attacked your people and destroyed your base. But I can make you a better offer than the Masters have. I promise that if you help us defeat the Masters, we will take our leave of this world. That, after all, was our goal in coming here. With the Masters plan thwarted, we would have no more reason to stay."

Jason said, "Robert, we know nothing about the strength of the Masters forces here on the planet. At the very least we should team up with them for a while just to gather intelligence. Think what an opportunity this is! Join the Masters! Can't you see this is the best choice! The only choice!"

Jason's realized his headache had returned. There was nothing he could do about it this time. He determined to just tough it out and get through it as best he could.

"What's gotten into you, Jason?" asked Drakinn. "You seem awful eager to join the Masters."

Jason replied, "I'm just stating the obvious here. Can't you see how much we have to gain by joining them?"

Robert went quiet while he pondered the decision. In the mean time, Reara took the opportunity to school her guest on the Zentraedi and their loyalties.

Reara spun around in her seat and pointed her index finger right at Gia's face, saying, "Listen to this real carefully slug. We Zentraedi are not the slaves of those rabid dogs anymore. I know they are not to be trusted and if you ever suggest that I am in consort with them again... I... I will gag you, blindfold you, and beat you into submission."

Reara then turned and mumbled to herself in a sarcastic tone, "*Do not harm our guest that's an order... Yeah, right!*" She punched one of the consoles and continued to mumble to herself. From the back of the cockpit Gia could hear, "Not that the Masters can be trusted, but if he chooses to aid those Invid slugs, I'm cutting out of here! Nameless millions have died under the yoke of Invid slavery!"

Reara radioed Robert on a coded channel, "Boss, the masters are not to be trusted. But I can't help but think they must be a better choice than the Invid."

Princess Gia, after hearing Reara speak of the "nameless millions" had something to say. In a scornful tone, she said, "Let's not forget who started this war. It was your people who defoliated my world, and took from us our precious flower. Now, you are given a chance, at least in some small measure, to

make up for that evil deed and what do you do? You cast it aside as refuse. You have not changed. You love only to fight. I think you care not about causes, or the suffering your people bring with them. We are your enemy because you made us so."

Reara replied, more than a little bit annoyed, "It was the Masters! It was the Masters doing, the defoliation of your world! We too were enslaved and exploited by them, don't forget. I do not want to cooperate with them, and if the Invid destroy the Masters I might despise you a little less." Then she mumbled, "I can't believe I'm explaining myself to this slug!"

Gia said to Reara, "Listen to you: 'despise you a little less', as if you are the one who has been wronged. My home world is barren; my people know nothing but war. I know who gave the orders, but your people blindly obeyed. So, exactly what about us is it that you despise? Is it the fact that you were never able to defeat us? I was there, in the Asyris Battle Zone, when your ruthless warlord Khyron destroyed nearly as many of your own people as he did of mine. I was very young, but I remember that. And you question our trustworthiness? Your very creator, Zor, was the greatest deceiver of all. If anyone should be worried about deception, it is I!"

Reara faced her guest again and said, "I was raised on Earth after the micronian war, I was brought up as a micronian child on Earth, the only fighting I ever saw before last night, was a computer game designed to train mecha pilots. I hate the Masters for enslaving my people, they knew nothing of freedom, of peace, and any who questioned this died by their hands. I would have liked to deal with the Masters myself! I did nothing but defend myself when your people attacked. If you see fault in that, well... Don't try to chide me for what another has done. I am Reara, not Khyron. I am ashamed of his crimes but I am not

responsible for them. I don't hate you slugs... or maybe I do... but you were just trying to kill me and my buddies only hours ago. So I'll blast you and your brothers and sisters before you get me. Understand, slug?"

Gia said with a smile, "We shall see. Your actions will speak volumes about *your* character. And I have a front row seat, don't I?"

Alex sat in his cockpit staring at his sensors, his face in a thoughtful expression. "Why don't we provide the Masters with a bit of help and then wait and see what happens? I get the feeling these aren't normal Invid, maybe they can take care of themselves?" He shrugged, staring into the video communicator. "Or we can kick the crap outa the Masters, last I knew the Regent was the problem, not the Regess. Maybe they will leave us alone once the masters are gone?" He asked for input and waited to here what the others had to say. More of the same, and not very useful.

Robert once again contacted the Invid prisoner who could be heard in the background arguing with Reara over something.

*Reara arguing with the Invid prisoner. Big surprise there.* He thought. Robert then asked, "So what is the Master's plan anyway?"

Gia responded, "They have only one goal: To rule the galaxy. They need this world to do that. It has something to do with the hyperspace disturbance. They want this world. If they think you are a threat, they will destroy you as well."

In an effort to buy some time, Robert told the Masters, "Your offer has merit, give me a minute to think about it."

After that he switched back to the coded channel he was using with Reara's guest and after listening to what she had to say, he told her "We can help you defeat the Masters and you

can give your people an advantage by warning them of the upcoming attack. I already know the Masters cannot be trusted. Now is the chance for the Invid to turn over a new leaf. I can let you go as an act of good will but only depending on the agreements we reach. Defeat the Masters and then leave, but if you do not honor your agreement of leaving the planet once the Masters are done, we will drive you off the planet by force."

Before Princess Gia could respond, she was cut off by a transmission from the Masters. They said, "Your time is up. We will not turn our backs to you and face our enemy with you to our rear. You can join us, or we will have to destroy you. Do not take this warning lightly. You are no match for us. Now make your choice, are you ally or enemy."

Just then, a coded message came in from the command carrier. It said, "Ground party, we will be passing over your position in ninety seconds. We have no anti ship weapons left, but we can try to soften them up with the laser turrets. We only have a few of the anti mecha turrets left, so we probably couldn't destroy them, but we could even the odds if a fight breaks out. Just giving you some more options. Make your choice quickly, we will orbit out of range in just over three minutes."

Wildcard said, "Hey, boss. I say we join the Invid. We already know we can't trust the Masters, if they'll agree to your plan, let's take a chance with them."

Then, Alex chimed in with an alternate plan, "Sir, I got an idea...The masters' assault carriers only have their bioroids on board right? From what I can remember the pilots are pretty stupid on there own they need someone telling them what to do. Maybe we could join them at first then jam their radio, blow up the transport or whatever, then help the Invid pick off the rest. If we can confuse them the carrier could give us some orbital fire

support. She only needs to take out the engines and were halfway there. I'm sure the Princess would get her people to help us."

Drakinn offered, "Yeah, We know we can't trust the Masters, the Invid on the other hand are a gamble at best, but still, a gamble is better than certain betrayal. We can join with the Invid and then after that is over take them out if they don't hold up their end of the bargain. Even though I hate those slime balls, it is probably our best bet."

Robert, his mind made up, then transmitted to the Masters "We were heavily damaged in our last encounter with the Invid, and we are low on firepower, so we'll try to open the breach you need in the hive's defenses but we might not be able to help much after that. Would that be satisfactory enough to keep you off our backs until we get on our way?"

The Masters responded, "That would be satisfactory. Follow us to the hive. We will attack immediately."

Princess Gia sighed and exclaimed to Reara, "So your leader has chosen to ally himself with the Masters? You will obliterate your only possible allies against a threat greater than you can imagine!"

Reara knew her commander better than that, and she liked being a step ahead of her Invid captive and explained most smugly, "No, fool. He is deceiving them. We can't take them on here in the open, even with our ship overhead. He's getting us closer to your people by letting the Masters believe we are going to help them."

Gia was greatly relieved, and liked the plan, but she had a suggestion. "That might work, but we run the risk of the Masters detecting our ruse. How about this: If you can punch a hole in our force field just long enough to let us and a few shock

troopers through, your ship could rain death down on the masters from orbit. We, however, would be under the protective cover of the shield. I could tell the Invid troopers to put on a good show, to convince the Masters that you are not allied with us. You would not be harmed. To do this I will need access to your communications equipment."

Reara asked, "I thought you guys communicated telepathically or something. Why do you need to use my radio?"

Gia explained, "I believe this is a common misconception about my people. Indeed we can hear the thoughts of the Regis, and sense when others of our kind are killed or are in great pain, but we cannot read each other's minds. In order to speak with my brothers and sisters, I must still speak aloud just as you do."

Another message came in from the command carrier. "Ground team, Roosevelt here. We are over your position. You have one and a half minutes before our orbit will take us out of range. After that, it will be another ninety minutes before we will be over your position again. What is your recommendation? Standing by to fire."

Robert told them, "Stand by on that offer to fire, don't jump the gun just yet. Make sure you orbit over the hive on your next couple of passes, but keep the Masters in your sights"

On another continent, far to the south, inside the Masters' main ship, a message was received. The clone at the monitor turned and said, "Masters, a message."

Shran asked, "What is the word from the assault carrier."

The clone replied, "The humans have joined us in the assault. They will open a hole in the Invid shield for us, but the message I was referring to is not from the assault carrier."

"Ah yes, our friend. What does he have to say?" asked the

Dakon.

"One word: Deception," answered the clone.

Baz ordered, "Very well, we will make preparations to punish them for their lies. We will lift off as soon as their little trap is sprung and teach them a lesson that they will not soon forget."

As the Masters assault carrier moved off toward the hive, Gia asked, "I will now need to use your communication equipment. I believe I can modify its signal so that my fellow Invid can receive it. I must tell my brother of our plan now, or we will be attacked as we approach the hive."

Robert agreed, "Reara, give her access to your mecha's radio. But we still cannot have her unrestrained inside your mecha. And Princess, remember, if your people turn on us we can always blast you from space just like we will with the Masters."

Reara sighed, and said to Gia, "Here is the radio, do what you must."

Gia asked Reara to make some frequency adjustments. She explained, "This is a frequency that we use for strategic communications." Soon, they were able to send a message to Pan. Gia explained the plan, and made arrangements for some shock troopers to fire at the team as they approached the shield. They were instructed to fire around the team, but not at them.

*I'm not really sure why I decided to go with the Invid over the Masters. I mean we all know the Masters are only after power, and will stop at nothing to get it. The Invid Regent was no better. But we really didn't know anything about the Regess. She had not shown her hand at all. We knew she had taken over the Earth, but the Masters had tried the same thing. I guess I just decided to go with the unknown rather than the certainty of the Masters, hoping that I had chosen the lesser of two evils.*

*From the collected journals of Commander Robert Farino*

## Chapter Seven

**The team headed out following the Masters assault** carrier. They approached to within ten miles of the hive and stopped. The assault carrier landed and the side hatch opened to let out the bioroids, the primary mecha of the Robotech Masters forces. Very humanoid in appearance, they stood about the same height as an alpha in battloid mode. Their biggest drawback was that they couldn't fly on their own. For that, they needed a hover pad, which along with allowing them to fly, also had a pair of ion cannons mounted to the front of the pad which greatly increased the bioroid's firepower. It was well known that the leader of any group of bioroids would pilot a red one, and the rest blue or green.

Approximately twenty blue and green bioroids exited the craft, along with their red leader. Most had hover pads on which

they could fly, the rest were on foot. Three bioroids approached the team, the red was among these.

Another strange synthetic sounding voice sounded over their radio. It said, "We three will accompany you to the shield. We will provide cover fire while you blast a hole for our forces to pass through. We must hurry, no doubt the Invid are aware of our presence."

"Lead on," replied Robert and the team left for the Hive. The three bioroids that came with the team insisted on approaching the hive at ground level to be less visible to the enemy. Rera followed closely behind, using every ounce of self control she could muster to keep from shooting one of the Bioroids. She knew the plan depended on her remaining calm for the time being.

The team soon got their first close up look at the hive. It was not complete. Large portions of the hive's dome were open. Gaping holes in the structure exposed the interior of the hive. Gia explained that the construction of the hive was halted when the Roosevelt appeared in orbit. After the battle, the Invid were too few to complete the work. She also said, "Don't let the appearance fool you, the hive is fully functional. Only some of the external structure was left incomplete."

Wildcard, tired of having to put up with the three bioroid pilots, said, "Hey Robert, I got dibs on the red one, once this thing goes down."

Robert, a little annoyed at Wildcard's impatience, said "Keep cool, soldier. When the time comes, I'm sure you'll do your part."

The Roosevelt radioed, "Ground forces, can you give us ten more minutes to get into position? We are still out of range."

Robert replied, "We'll do what we can, but I think the

engagement is imminent."

The red bioroid pilot stopped the group, saying, "If we approach any closer, we risk running into sentries. Take the shot from here."

Wildcard overhearing that the Roosevelt was still ten minutes out, offered a way to stall until it got there. He said, "Hey Robert, what if I fake a malfunction, I could fall to the ground and force us to stop for a couple of minutes, what do you say."

Robert disagreed, "I don't think they will buy it, Wildcard. Let me try something else." Then he tried his best to stall the bioroid leader.

"We have to be within one hundred yards for the destabilizer weapon to be effective against an Invid shield," said Robert

The bioroid leader replied, "We can move to within three hundred yards, and no closer."

"Very well, let's get going," said Robert.

It only took a couple of minutes to get within range of the shield. It wasn't enough time for the Roosevelt to orbit overhead.

"Change of plan," said Robert to the rest of his team. "We're gonna blow the shield now. Everyone but Wildcard and I will take cover inside the shield. Nape will direct the ground forces in my absence. Wildcard and I will fly at top speed towards the carrier and try to take out the engines, then we let the Roosevelt finish it off when it comes overhead. Then we'll get back here as fast as we can."

"Ok, here we go. Nape, you've got the team. When I fire, take them through the hole in the shield and blast as many bad guys as possible." Robert explained, "And Reara, by bad guys, I

do mean Masters, understood?”

“I have a firm grasp on the situation, boss,” came Reara’s reply. A slight chuckle could be heard from the back seat.

Robert radioed the Ikazuchi, "What's the ETA for the next bombardment window?"

The Ikazuchi responded, "We come over your position every 90 minutes."

“Roger that.”

Robert fired a burst from his destabilizer rifle at the shield and hit it right at ground level. The shield began to glow at the point of impact, and after a few seconds, a breach formed. The hole was easily large enough to allow mecha to run through.

Two shock troopers burst forth from beneath the ground near the point of impact and took to the air, moving in the direction of the group. The shock troopers each fired a shot that hit the ground about thirty feet on either side of the group. Dirt flew into the air and trees fell, but none of the REF mecha was harmed.

The three bioroids, unaware of the trap unfolding around them began firing at the two Invid. Both green bioroids missed their target, but the red one hit the closest shock trooper. The shock trooper survived the blast, and pressed the attack.

Robert signaled to Wildcard that it was time to take off for the assault carrier.

Nape yelled, “Go Go Go!” over the radio as he charged toward the hole in the shield. The others followed close behind. The ground erupted into flying chunks of charred dirt all around the team as the shock troopers continued their feigned resistance.

Wildcard fired a volley of missiles at the red bioroid as he departed along with Robert. The red bioroid, unaware that he

was being fired upon, was utterly destroyed before he could warn the assault carrier of the humans' treachery.

As they approached the assault carrier, Robert and Wildcard saw twenty bioroids heading toward the hive. About half were on hover pads. The Carrier was still on the ground.

Robert said, "Wildcard, ready those missiles, were going to hit 'em hard and fast so they can't go anywhere."

Nape's team reached the hole in the Invid shield. The Invid continued firing at them and the bioroids, but only scored a hit on one of the green bioroids. The annihilation disk impacted the bioroid's shoulder, throwing up a shower of sparks but it was only slightly damaged. The hole in the shield was large enough for two alphas to pass through shoulder to shoulder, a bit larger than Nape would have preferred.

The blue bioroid pilot, realizing that his master was dead and that he was now in command, called for the rest of his forces to move toward the opening in the shield.

Bioroids poured out of the tree line racing toward the REF team in a desperate attempt to take possession of the breach in the shield.

Reara taking notice that only one bioroid was not charging their position, told Nape, "I am pretty sure that blue is in charge now. I'm going to try and take him out! Cover me!"

"Do it!" yelled Nape.

Then Reara transformed her pod to tank mode. Blasts from the bioroid weapons rocked her mecha as she took careful aim on the apparent leader. Her shot took the head clean off the blue bioroid, but remarkably, it still stood. All the sensors mounted in the head were lost. The pilot compartment opened, so that the pilot could still see. A hover pad landed next to the headless

mecha and it jumped on.

"Damn!" exclaimed Reara and she quickly turned and drove her mecha through the breach.

Nape transmitted, "All units to battloid mode. Get inside the shield and lay down fire to keep the bioroids out!" He then went into the breach and took up his fighting position firing two smoke missiles to provide cover so no one saw the team setting up their defensive position.

A message from Robert came over the radio. "Try to knock some of those bioroids down before they come back to the carrier!"

Nape yelled, "We'll do what we can, boss!"

The shock troopers outside the shield were heavily outnumbered by the flood of bioroids. Blasts from the bioroid weapons hit them from all sides and pieces of armor and nutrient fluid rained down on the battlefield as their mecha exploded.

Reara was the last one through. As she reached the smoke, she turned in time to see the destruction of the Invid troopers. The fact that they had died to cover her retreat was not lost on her.

Prince Pan then arrived on scene in his RCB and said, "Let me have a turn." As he stepped into the breach. He fired volley after volley of missiles at the approaching bioroids.

Two bioroids were torn to pieces by his missiles before he took cover behind the shield again.

Pan then said, "An eye for an eye."

With Pan and the REF mecha firing on the bioroids from behind the protection of the shield, the bioroids had little chance, and were soon in full retreat.

Once Prince Pan saw that the immediate threat had passed, he turned to Reara and, gesturing to Drakinn he said, "Release

the Princess, or I will kill this one!"

Gia, over the radio, said, "Don't you dare harm them, brother! You know we need them, and they have not harmed me."

As Robert reached the assault carrier he dropped to treetop level without shedding an ounce of speed, positioned himself to approach the Assault Carrier's engines and flew straight towards them while spraying them with his destabilizer gun pod. At the same time he told Wildcard to get his missiles ready, at least twenty of them, "We fire on my mark," Robert instructed.

The assault carrier began to lift off. If it got airborne, it would be a significant threat. Despite its size, it was easily as maneuverable as an alpha.

Robert waited until the last possible second to ensure his missiles would hit as close as possible on the engines. Calling out for Wildcard to fire, he loosed his flock of missiles.

Wildcard did the same and the engines became a giant fireball. The carrier began to fall back to the ground. All of the bioroids turned and headed back to their crippled carrier.

Robert pulled back on the stick as hard as he could to climb and avoid crashing into the bioroid's transport ship. As soon as he climbed out of the maneuver he inverted to see what damage he had caused. As he did, the carrier's secondary laser cannons fired on him.

Robert broke hard to avoid the shot from the assault carrier. After dodging, he said to Wildcard, "Take evasive action and set up for a strafing run on her cannons before those bioroids get back here, once they're here we get the hell outa dodge and let the Roosevelt do the rest!"

He then called the Roosevelt, "Begin bombardment of the

carrier as soon as you are in range, but give us a 15 second count down to get clear before you do."

The Roosevelt replied, "Roger ground team, be advised, we are two minutes out from bombardment at this time. We will give you a one minute warning and a 15 second countdown."

Robert and Wildcard continued to pound the crippled ship for a few more minutes, taking severe damage to their mecha when the bioroids arrived and began to defend their ship like a swarm of angry wasps defending their nest.

Back at the hive, the team was caught up in their own crisis.

Pan yelled, "Do not ignore my demands! You mock me with your indifference! Shall I destroy you all? If you wish to live, release the Princess!"

Gia, trying to diffuse the situation, said, "Stop this now! If this Zentraedi can refrain from harming me, then surely you can refrain from harming these humans."

Pan replied, "It is their choice! If they release you, there will be no bloodshed. I will not be ignored!"

Reara asked Gia, "Are all Invid this arrogant?"

Gia responded with a smile, "Arrogant? No. We really are superior."

Alex moved his battloid mode alpha next to Drakinn, holding his GU-XX in both hands, saying "I don't care much for your demands right now, the princess is our only guarantee here." He gestured to the rest of the squad with his alpha's arm. "Take a look around. Sure, you might get one, maybe even two of us, but you can rest assured, you won't survive the encounter. We don't want to fight, we're here for the Masters."

Alex changed radio frequency, talking to Robert. "Sir,

we've got a situation here, we sure could use your presence."

Robert answered, "Sorry, but we're a little pre-occupied at the moment." The deep base thud of weapons fire striking his fighter sounded in the background of the transmission and the image flickered. "I'll get there when I can."

Reara continued to talk Pan down, "We have no time for this bickering! Gia has been promised her liberty. But the person that guaranteed her safety is busy fighting *your* enemy. He might be threatened by the same bioroids we let escape! Your dear little sister is safe, so learn to recognize the most immediate and bigger threats. Now let's go help them 'cause the sooner we get rid of the Masters, the sooner I can get her out of my battle pod."

Reara then said to Nape, "Robert is in a world of hurt if we all stay here. I am not going to disobey you but please let me help my friend."

Jason, watching the situation develop around him, stood between Drakinn and Pan, blocking Pan's line of fire. Jason judged that his logan could probably take a shot from Pan's weapon, but there was no way Drakinn's cyclone armor would survive if it was hit.

Nape said, "Pan, knock this off! The battle isn't over yet!"

"The hive is safe, the attack averted. I say the battle is over. Now give me back my sister!"

Nape's watch beeped, and a smile came to his face. He said, "Stand by people Zeus will soon be sending his lighting bolts from the heavens."

Another transmission came in from Robert. He said, "We could use some help here guys!"

Nape answered, "Robert, I think the Invid are backing out of the deal. One way or another, we'll be along shortly. We may have to take care of a little family dispute here first, if you

know what I mean.”

“Pan?” Robert asked.

“Right, he’s about two seconds away from having my alpha’s big metallic foot lodged in his RCB’s tailpipe,” said Nape.

Gia got back on the radio and said, "You people have no Idea who you are dealing with. If Pan so wished, you would all be dead now."

She addressed Pan once more, "Pan, if you want these people to help us get rid of the Masters, then we need to help them now. Their leader is in trouble and there is no time to get me back to the hive, so let’s help them now, and they will release me once the danger to their leader has passed."

Pan backed down, saying "I will let you live for now, because my sister wishes it. It is no wonder your world now belongs to us. You have a nasty habit of underestimating your enemy."

Dirt and grass flew into the air as six shock troopers and one pincer command unit burst from the ground, surrounding the group.

Pan, chuckling, said, "Foolish humans. I will help you, because you obviously need it. But you must release the Princess once we finish with the masters."

Wildcard saw a brilliant flash as the assault carrier loosed an energy bolt from its ion cannon and he instinctively raised his mecha's arms to protect himself. The blast nearly took his mecha's left arm completely off at the elbow.

The Roosevelt signaled, "One minute warning! We will be in weapons range in one minute! Ground forces please acknowledge."

Robert acknowledged the transmission and said to Wildcard, "Let's get the hell outa here. Follow me, and blast anything that gets in our path!"

"Damn!" said Wildcard as he surveyed the damage to his mecha's left hand and transformed into fighter mode. Then he broke hard right and followed Robert toward the hive.

The horde of bioroids fired at them as they departed. Robert broke to the left to dodge the attack, but his shadow alpha was hit in the number two engine. The blast rocked his mecha violently.

Smoke started to fill the cockpit, and several warning horns and buzzers sounded all at once. A message that flashed "Stealth" on his control panel told him that the shadow's stealth systems had stopped functioning.

Doing their best to outrun the bioroids, Robert and Wildcard retreated back to the hive as the Roosevelt called them saying, "15, 14, 13..."

As they entered the opening in the shield, they saw the team surrounded by Invid. Robert and Wildcard changed their mecha back into battloid mode and set down with their team.

Pan said to Robert, "I think we were just about to come save you. My, that certainly was easy, but you seem to have taken quite a beating."

Robert addressed Pan, "So, you're the trouble maker. Just watch this."

The carrier's transmission continued, "3, 2, 1, firing!" Bolts of blue energy rained down from the sky and explosions like rolling thunder could be heard in the distance. A huge secondary explosion was heard above the rest as the assault carrier exploded into a large mushroom cloud.

As glowing bolts of death continued to fall from the

heavens, Robert said, "Just keep this in mind next time you get the urge to pull any more shenanigans with my team."

Three minutes later, the firestorm ceased and there was silence. A synthetic voice on the radio said, "Humans, you will pay for your deception. You think the Invid can protect you from our wrath? Think again."

A message came in from the Roosevelt, "Ground team, there is a large ship rising from the surface of the planet on an intercept course for the Roosevelt. It is of Robotech Master design, and just slightly smaller than our ship. Without our anti ship cannons, we're severely out gunned. By our estimate, it will overtake us in orbit in less than 10 minutes. We are launching your evac shuttle now. Maybe we can extract your team and get the hell out of here before they reach us."

Robert fatalistically replied, "Not likely, but we can try."

*The defection of Princess Ariel, also known as Marlene, to the Humans side in this war wasn't entirely unprecedented. Prior to the departure of the 21<sup>st</sup> Mars Division, a similar incident took place on Peryton. Although she differed from Ariel in that her memories were completely intact, Princess Gia also chose to stay with the Humans rather than fight alongside her own people. It is regrettable that more studies could not have been completed on her. Perhaps a way could have been found to avoid the staggering loss of life in the campaign to retake the Earth from the forces of the Regess.*

*History of the Third Robotech War, Vol III*

## **Chapter Eight**

**As the team regrouped at the edge of the shield,** another transmission was received, this time it was from a Horizon-t shuttle. "Ground forces, Horizon shuttle UES Aires here. We are one minute out from your position. Stand by for pickup."

Nape acknowledged the transmission and turned over command of his team back to Robert.

Robert then contacted to Reara and Gia, "We're leaving, we are damaged too badly and continuing to fight would jeopardize the Roosevelt. Let Gia go, that was part of the deal and she earned her freedom. Gia, I hope you have learned that humans

do keep their word, and let your kind know this. Perhaps someday our races might stop killing each other long enough to find out if we could coexist peacefully, until then I bid you farewell."

Robert asked the Roosevelt, "Could our beta intercept the Master's ship before it reaches you? I might be able to give them a nasty little surprise before we go"

The Roosevelt reported, "We are launching our remaining Mecha to engage the masters' ship. But we can't hold them.... What the hell is that?! Ground team, something gigantic is defolding near the planet!"

The Tirolian ship approached the crippled Ikazuchi command carrier. The Roosevelt fled as fast as its damaged engines could carry it.

The Roosevelt contacted the ground team for the last time, saying: "We're taking fire from the Masters' ship, they are overtaking us!" Then an explosion could be heard in the background of the transmission.

Captain McKinney's hopes of avoiding a firefight were dashed as the Masters' ship opened fire with its main cannon, scoring a direct hit on the stern of the ship and taking out the main thrusters. On the armored skin of the Roosevelt, MAC III's and other mecha that were augmenting the ships guns with their own firepower were blown free by the blast and drifted helpless in space.

The captain gave the order to abandon ship, but it was too late. The Tirolian ship fired again and the damage caused the Roosevelt to rip nearly in half. The ship began to tumble and drift into the upper atmosphere.

From the ground, the ship could be seen as a brilliant red fireball. Secondary explosions erupted all around the ship and it

began to come apart.

Along with the burning wreckage of their ship, the ground team saw something else in the sky that made the hair stand up on the back of their necks. It was a familiar sight; something that they had become accustomed to seeing in the skies over Earth before they left with the expeditionary forces. Rera recognized it because it was identical to the place of her berth. The moon like object hanging motionless in the late afternoon sky was a Robotech factory satellite.

"Holy crap..." Alex cried, eyes wide, seeing the falling Ikazuchi far above him. "Man we are screwed!" Shaking his head Alex turned his alpha to face Xavier. "We are so screwed now!"

Robert attempted to calm his troops, saying "Alright, shut up! Just let me think for a second!"

"Think of what, dude? That's our ticket home burning up there! We're screwed! And that's a factory satellite hanging up there next to our burning ship...."

"I know! But I swear to you, we aren't finished yet." Then Robert asked the Invid, "Gia, Pan, do the Invid have some sort of plan on how to deal with that thing up there? We could use some suggestions. Also can we still count on you to help us deal with the Masters even in these extremely heavy odds and with Gia already out of our hands?"

Pan explained, "Our mission is the same as yours, to defeat the Masters. We will help you. But we have no weapons powerful enough to destroy the factory satellite."

Robert said to the rest of the group, "Well ladies and gentlemen I believe we are stuck here for a while, and we have two options, hide and lick our wounds or take the fight to the enemy before they can bring it to us. Rera, you were born on

one of those things weren't you? Can you think of any way for us to get a tactical advantage? Pan, what resources can the Invid put up? And how much do you know about the Masters' plans?"

Pan offered, "Surely their plan is to reactivate the factory and build a fleet of ships, possibly to retake Tirol from your people. They could also revive the Zentraedi aboard and use them to crew their fleet. Obviously, we cannot allow this."

Reara said, "If you ask a Zentraedi, why don't we do what was done to me? Expel the warriors from clone tubes prematurely? Most will probably die, the rest will be too sick to fight. I know the layout of those things well. Have the Invid lay low, and stay ready until we give the word. If we can get aboard and find the reflex furnace," she giggled, "Blow 'em sky high!!"

Jason said to Robert, "What about the nuke? Couldn't we sneak it aboard with the shadows before the masters get there?"

"I think it's a little late to beat the Masters to their new home in the sky," Robert replied.

Reara looked up at the orbital factory. After a thoughtful pause, she said to Robert, "Boss, the factory is our way home, or our grave, but we must try to take it. We cannot let the Masters keep it, nor can we destroy it; another factory will turn the tide of the war. Besides if the Masters use it to wake the Zentraedi on board we are done for and the slugs are too." Turning to look at Pan, she said, "No offense."

Pan looked at her for a while, then replied, "Right."

Nape had a different idea. He suggested that they could fall back to the casino garage and make repairs before beginning an offensive on the factory. After all it was a more logical point for any other downed pilot from the ship to head for.

Wildcard said, "I agree with Nape, Robert's and my mecha need heavy repairs." He paused shortly, then continued, "Here's

an idea, to cut down on repair time, I suggest the Invid give us a hand. I'm guessing this hive should have a repair shop... or something. I also need more missiles. I've got less than half of my full load. Maybe some Invid missiles are compatible, if not, maybe the casino will have some?"

Pan explained, "Our proticulture power cells may be compatible with your mecha. However, we have no means of making repairs to your mecha at the hive. It may be possible to modify our missiles for use with your mecha, but we do not know how. If you can make the modifications, you may re-supply your missiles from our stores."

Robert said, "Alright, we press the attack on the factory as soon as we are re-supplied. We will board the Horizon-t as soon as it arrives. Pan, can you spare any enforcer or pincer units to come along and help us infiltrate the factory? Also, how many troops could you come up with to simulate a frontal attack and distract the satellites defenses long enough for us to get close? As soon as we are in you can pull your troops out and minimize your casualties. When we reach the satellite Rera takes point since she is our tour guide. We take out the central computer and then we go after the Masters, if that doesn't work we can always go visit the reflex furnace and set it on 'toast'. Rera, I realize the value of that thing, but if it looks like we aren't going to be able to take it from them, we must ensure that the Masters can't keep it either."

Pan replied to Robert's idea, "Yes, the Masters will be expecting us, the Invid, to make a move soon. I think we should give them what they expect. But I think you could use some more firepower. You should allow Princess Gia and me to join your infiltration team."

Rera said, calmly at first but growing more agitated as she

talked, "Pan, all B.S. aside, I'm starting to like you. You are a warrior. That is the problem. I don't think it's a good idea to... how do the micronians say? Keep two bulls in the same pen?"

With a dismissing gesture, Pan said "I can control myself, how about you?"

Reara gritted her teeth like a rabid dog, "You threaten my boys again, you had best make sure you kill me first! If it happens again I'll rip you apart! I got an idea! Let's go. You and me. One on one, right now!"

Robert tried to put a stop to the bickering by saying, "Private Reara! You have more self control than that! I don't want to hear another word about this."

Wildcard, witnessing the exchange of unpleasantries between Reara and Pan, said, "Both of you... Shut Up!" Turning to Reara he said, "You've got Masters up your butt you selfish daughter of a test tube, and all you can think of is settling your own private score with this other idiot. Our number one priority is the stupid factory, afterwards, I'll even help both of you kill each other if you so desire."

Reara finally agreed, "All right, point well taken. We do not stand a chance against the satellite in our present condition. If the Masters are already aboard they could use its weapons to bombard the hive, and us. Believe me that thing has enough firepower to make the SDF-1 look like a toy. We should rearm and take into consideration that we need to check the crash site of the Roosevelt, and let's not forget to eat and rest."

Robert muttered to himself, "What am I going to do with these two mecha driving morons to keep them from killing each other? We definitely do not need any more conflicts amongst ourselves."

Xavier changed his alpha fighter to Guardian mode, saying,

"Robert, me 'n Alex will go look for survivors from the Roosevelt, if that's all right with you?"

"That's as good a plan as any right now, go ahead."

Alex took to the sky with Xavier, but couldn't resist a parting shot at the two would-be combatants. "You guys are idiots! You can't fight each other while that thing is over our heads! Morons." Shaking his head, Alex followed Xavier.

The Aires set down approximately 100 meters away from the team. A voice came over the radio, "You guys need a lift?"

Nape had a thought, "We still should have supplies aboard our previous shuttle's pods and the pods might still be in tact. It was loaded up with supplies and ammo, so it would be much faster to retrieve them than to try to configure Invid missiles to our systems."

Robert answered, "Good idea, Nape, that should save some time."

Nape called up the Aires and said, "Shuttle this is Corporal Nape, need you to start scanning for survivors from the Roosevelt."

Aires replied, "We have detected no re-entries since the carrier was destroyed. That means either there were no survivors, or they are still in orbit."

At that time, another RCB came flying up to the group and set down next to Pan. A familiar voice came over the radio. It was Gia, and she said, "No offense, Reara, but this is so much better than the back seat of your pod. So, now what?"

Jason asked Gia, "Is it possible for humans to pilot some Invid mecha? Hopefully you have some extra RCBs or something."

Gia explained, "From what I have seen of Reara's mecha, the controls are vastly different. It would take time to train you,

perhaps you could learn in a couple of days. Other than that, I see no problem. We do have a couple of spares."

Jason contacted the shuttle and asked, "What was the position of the Masters' ship in relation to that factory?"

The Aires replied, "That was a big ship. I'd say it was a Tirolian multipurpose transport. I think those things have fold capability. When we entered the atmosphere, they were about thirty minutes out from the factory. That means they should be there in about ten or fifteen minutes. If you are thinking about beating them to the factory, forget about it."

Robert called Alex and Xavier and instructed, "Signal me when you find the crash site of the Roosevelt. We'll rendezvous with you there shortly. Rera, Wildcard you both go and salvage the fallen shuttle, while the rest of us go with the new one to check the Roosevelt's crash site. We will rendezvous back at the hive as soon as you finish with the task at hand, that should give you something to do while you cool your heels. Pan, since you are obviously in charge of the Invid here, perhaps you should stay, organizing the attack on the satellite. I mean not to offend you but frankly I feel more comfortable with Gia than with you. She seems to be able to control her temper better and I have a hard enough time keeping Rera under control. The last thing I need is two hot-heads in the group."

Pan agreed, "Fine, I'd prefer to spend as little time around humans as possible."

Nape, Robert and Gia headed off to meet Alex and Xavier at the crash site of the Roosevelt. Rera, Wildcard, Jason and Drakinn headed for the crashed Horizon-t. Pan went to prepare the Invid for an assault on the Robotech Masters.

In space, Corporal Stram, an alpha pilot that had survived the destruction of the Roosevelt, followed the Tirolian ship toward the factory at a discrete distance, but it was hard not to be noticed since he was in the emptiness of space with nothing to hide behind. However, the ship didn't seem to consider him a threat and left him alone.

As the Tirolian ship carrying the Masters approached the orbital factory, a mammoth docking bay opened to receive it. The factory, as large as a small moon, dwarfed the Masters ship. The factory looked strangely organic, like a giant metallic turnip floating in space with four secondary modules attached to the main module by stalks, which connected at its equator. Even the smaller secondary modules were more than one hundred miles across. Stram had the feeling of being entirely too close to the thing, but it was an illusion caused by its extreme size. His radar told him that he was hundreds of miles away, yet it still filled his entire field of view.

As the Masters ship disappeared into the factory satellite, Stram thought to himself, *now what do I do.*

A message came in over the radio on an open frequency. The voice on the radio said, "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, this is Corporal Matthews, hovertank pilot with the REF forces. My mecha is adrift in orbit above the planet and I have no means of re-entering the atmosphere. I have approximately ten hours of air left. Any REF personnel please respond."

Back on the planet, Nape said, "The only vehicle able to retrieve him is the horizon-t. But it will need an escort to and from space."

Robert agreed and ordered the shuttle pilots, "Go get him!

Don't make it pretty, just as fast as you can so you do not make targets of yourselves. As soon as you have him, rendezvous with us back at the Roosevelt crash site."

Robert contacted Matthews and let him know that help was on the way.

Before departing, a crewmember from the Aires approached Robert's mecha. He had a piece of paper in his hand. Robert opened the canopy of his shadow alpha. The man in CVR-3 armor handed him the paper saying, "Captain McKinney sent this with us. We were supposed to deliver it to you, sir."

With the letter delivered, he ran back to the shuttle and it lifted off and headed for the stranded hovertank.

Robert looked at the paper he had just been handed. *It must be the first of the month back on Tirol*, he thought to himself. The paper was a memorandum for record that officially promoted Robert to the rank of Sergeant. Additionally, Rera, Jason DeKirk, and Swift Wildcard were promoted to corporal. Promotion lists like this were always released on the first of the month. Robert decided to keep the news about the three corporals promotion to himself until he could announce it in a proper setting, with all gathered round. They could use some good news, and this would normally be cause to celebrate. Maybe tonight, when they could get some much needed rest. This would be just the thing to take their minds off their bleak situation.

Another message came in unexpectedly over the same frequency as the hovertank's message, "Matthews, this is Corporal Stram, what are your co-ordinates? I'll render any assistance I can."

Floating alone in the blackness of space, the hovertank was helpless. The pilot replied, "I'm directly over the main

continent. I can't be much more specific than that. I have the factory in sight, so I'm somewhere between it and the planet."

Stram responded, "I'm on my way, once you're safe, we'll link up with the ground forces. For now, let's try to fit you into my cockpit."

Stram headed for the general area and began searching for the stranded mecha. He picked it up on his radar, and moved in close. It looked to be in good condition. Stram asked Matthews to climb out of his cockpit and try to climb into the alpha. The hover tank pilot agreed to Stram's plan and climbed out of his mecha, protected by his Southern Cross style armor. He quickly discovered that with them both wearing armor, he could not fit into Stram's cockpit.

Then, on his radio, Stram heard, "Corporal Stram, This is Sergeant Farino, REF ground forces. Can you safely retrieve that hover tank? If you can, rendezvous with the Ground forces at the following coordinates. If not, cover him and let us know so we can send someone to pick you both up."

Stram reported, "Sergeant, I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to pull this off. We anxiously await your pickup."

Reara, overhearing the transmission, asked "Sergeant? Since when?"

"Since right now. I just got the latest promotion list."

"Hey, am I on there?" Reara asked excitedly. She had been anxiously awaiting the list to come out for a while now.

"How about me?" came Wildcard's query.

"All of you, back to work. I'll let everyone see the list when we get to the rec. center. How's that for motivation?"

"You suck, boss!"

"Who said that?"

Silence.

On the ground, Nape had some ideas. He mused, "You know, if those cargo pods are still in tact at the other shuttle's crash site, we could have our new shuttle drop it's pods at the rec. center and then return to the crash site. It could pick up the other pods and take them to the rec. center too."

Robert, listening to Nape over his radio, agreed that it sounded like a sound plan.

Reara was on her way to the crash site. Piloting her mecha toward the village that had become Brian Stuart's grave, she thought about how she had never made it a point to get to know him well, and she regretted that. She then hit the thrusters to the max. As the pod's engines begin to scream and the tank changed shape, taking battle pod shape as it climbed into the sky. A cloud of dust washed over the area where she had previously stood.

Robert, his plan starting to take shape as each member of the team began to focus on their assigned duties, felt a little less stressed. He transformed his mecha into guardian mode as he, Gia and Nape, approached crash site of the Roosevelt.

When Reara and company arrived at the crash remains of the Horizon-t they found the two cargo pods still intact, however one of them was completely empty. The rest of the ship was a crumpled wreck. In the distance they saw Brian's AAT-40. They found that the AAT-40 was still fully functional, but the structure around the driver's seat was bent and mangled where the RCB had ripped the metal apart in order to grab him.

In the shuttle's cargo pod, they found crates of short-range missiles, just what they needed most. They also found ammunition for their small arms and magazines for their mecha's GU-XX gun pods. There were also two Battler

cyclones. Another crate contained medium range missiles.

They could hardly contain their excitement. This was a major find. Not quite as good as finding an undamaged alpha fighter, but it meant they could replenish the munitions for the whole team's mecha.

At the crash site of the Roosevelt, Robert, Nape and Gia arrived only to find a burning hulk in a mile wide crater. If they didn't already know that it was a starship, they probably wouldn't have recognized it as such. Even the most thorough search could not turn up anything more useful than pieces of mecha. Two alpha legs, an arm, and a beta arm. They did find the remains of the four MTA-Titan transport/assault vehicles, but they were as badly damaged as the ship itself. There were no survivors.

Robert was quiet and contemplative as he looked over the wreckage of the ship. Gia eventually could take it no more and broke the silence. "How can I help?"

Robert told her that they would stop by the hive on their way to the casino. There they would talk strategy with Pan. But for now, she should simply help him look for anything of value in the wreckage. Their search, however, was fruitless.

Back at the crash site of the Horizon-t, Wildcard and Reara began rummaging through the remains of the shuttle. Reara contacted the rest of the team and reported on what they had found. As Umbra set on the horizon, the factory glowed like a jewel in the evening sky. As darkness fell, the sunlight reflected off the factory satellite cast a faint white glow on the terrain, very much like moonlight. The team looked up at this familiar sight. The thought crossed their mind that it had been a long

time since they had any real sleep. Their eyelids were all growing heavy, and their eyes burnt. More than one of them got the idea to open the canopies of their guardian mode mecha and let the cool night wind help keep them awake.

Once aboard the factory, the Masters made their way to the main control center. There they began the process of reviving the long dormant systems of the factory, including its crew. Asleep in stasis chambers throughout the factory were several thousand Zentraedi warriors and Robotech Masters bioroid pilots that would soon be brought back to life. They would make an instant army and work force, which would jump-start the Masters' plan to bring their extinct empire back to life.

The factory was capable of constructing ships as large as a city and powerful enough to destroy entire worlds. Soon enough, the Masters would begin construction of their fleet, but their first priority was the elimination of the only force that could still oppose them.

"Bring the main proton cannon online immediately!" commanded the three Masters in unison.

"Those humans will pay for their treachery! Now we will show them just how insignificant they really are!" said Shran.

The three clones working at the control panel soon reported, "The weapon is charged and ready to fire, Masters."

"So, they would ally themselves with the Invid? Then we shall put an end to that. Target the Invid hive and fire!"

As the evening sky grew darker, a strange greenish light caught the attention of the team. When they looked up, they saw a brilliant green line that streaked from the orbital factory straight toward the horizon. The beam of light lasted for a few

seconds and then disappeared. A few minutes later, an earthquake the likes of which none of the team had ever witnessed shook them off their feet. Their bipedal mecha lost their balance and fell to the ground. The quake quickly subsided and they noticed something over the horizon, back in the direction of the mountains. Something was glowing red, like a giant fire burning slowly somewhere just out of sight.

Princess Gia cringed in pain. She felt the loss of her fellow Invid as if something had been ripped right out of her gut. Robert rushed to her side, but he was still unable to take his eyes off the fiery horizon. After a minute, Gia said in a pitiful tone, "My brother is dead. So are the rest of my people on this world. Now I am all alone. I have failed the Regess."

Robert exclaimed, "My God..."

He stared at the reddish orange glow on the horizon. Suddenly, he began to doubt himself and his plans. Then he realized that little had actually changed. They must proceed, take the factory from the Masters, and they must succeed or the whole galaxy would have to pay the consequences. He had to be strong, for the team.

Robert snapped out of his shock and addressed the Invid princess, "Gia, I'm sorry for your loss, but you are not alone, as long as we're fighting on the same side. I'd like to consider you an ally. And you have not failed your Regess, you are still alive, and that means that we can still keep on fighting, I would be honored if you joined us."

He genuinely felt sorry for her. Just a couple of days ago, he would have rejoiced at this turn of events. But now, he was actually feeling compassion for an Invid. He was more than a little surprised at himself.

Gia replied to Robert's offer, "You are very kind to offer.

An Invid working for the REF... No, I think not. We have a truce, not an alliance. Even if we are able to defeat the Masters, we will never agree on one key issue: possession of the Earth. Of course I will aid you in any way I can in our fight against our common enemy. But I'm afraid that if we should meet after this, on Earth, we would be mortal enemies again. I wish it were not so. If only the Regess could see you humans as I do now."

Gia looked as if she might cry, and Robert felt compelled to comfort her, but he soon snapped out of it. Robert thought to himself, *What am I thinking? Just last month she was probably a slug flopping around in a bath of nutrient fluid in the cockpit of some shock trooper! I need to focus on the job at hand.*

Robert contacted the Horizon-t. "We found some scraps we could use but need them picked up, what would your ETA be?"

"We are approaching the hovertank at this time. Give us about a half an hour and we can be there."

Robert to Nape, "Nape that was an excellent idea you had earlier about using the casino for a repair facility, but the rec. center could be an obvious target. We could use the bunkers as a mobile home and hide them near the rec. center, only going into it when necessary. That way we safeguard our supplies. Now keep those ideas coming and we might just have a chance against the Masters."

He then helped gather the mecha parts for pick up, and went to explore the communications deck in the Ikazuchi to see if anything was left of it. All of the communications equipment was burnt and charred by the heat of the uncontrolled reentry.

Robert suggested to Nape, "We've got half an hour to kill right now. Want to go with Gia to see if anything is left of the hive? She believes everything was destroyed, but maybe some supplies or something could be salvaged for her."

Robert then turned to Gia and said, "Could you handle going back to what is left of the hive? Or would you rather we go and see if we could salvage anything for you? I know it is hard to go and see the place where so much of your family has just died, and that is why I ask."

Gia replied, "There are no survivors. Of that I am sure. However, there may be something we can salvage from the Hive. I will return to be sure."

Then, to both of them, Robert said, "After the recon, go to the rec. center. Whoever gets there first starts preparing the place, but do not turn the power on yet, so as not to draw too much attention. The Masters will be watching that place very closely. The first hint that we are in it and zap. Game over."

Robert then said to Wildcard and Rera on a private channel, "Try to contact the Perytonian government, see if they can transmit an emergency message to the REF fleet explaining our situation. Let me know what happens."

"Will do boss," said Wildcard as he began transmitting on a coded channel, "This is Private Wildcard from the REF to the Perytonian Government."

Robert transmitted, "Awaiting your arrival Aires."

Then Alex and Xavier approached Robert. Alex said, "Well this is just great! What the hell are we supposed to do now?"

"Just stick with us, don't venture off on your own. We're not finished yet. We just need to put our heads together and we can find a way out of this mess," explained Robert.

To that, Alex said, "No, I'm pretty sure we're gonna be vaporized."

Xavier chided his long time friend, "With that kind of attitude, you're probably right."

"Shall I sum up our position? All you optimists seem to be

forgetting a few things. We are only a handful of mecha, up against an entire orbital Robotech factory, which has enough firepower to destroy an entire city in a single blast. In about an hour, they will have an entire army of Masters and Zentraedi and our only allies, the Invid, are nothing but crispy critters in a crater!" exclaimed Alex.

Then Xavier said, "You know, he's right, we're gonna be vaporized. But on the bright side, there are worse ways to go."

"Ever the optimist," remarked Alex.

In space Stram received a message that brought him a small bit of hope. It said, "Corporal Stram, this is the REF Horizon-t, UES Aires. We are en-route to your position."

Stram replied, "Roger that, Aires. There is a VHT in the vicinity with a dangerously low supply of oxygen and it is imperative to pick him up ASAP. If needed, I will fly cover for you to pick him up."

Overhearing Stram's transmission, the VHT pilot said, "Thanks. And the name's Dan Matthews. I was piloting my hovertank on the surface of the Ikazuchi to supplement the crippled laser turrets when an explosion threw me off the surface. Shortly after, the whole ship seemed to catch on fire and fall into the atmosphere."

The Aires responded, "Once we arrive, we will depressurize one of the cargo pods and open the door. Take your hovertank into the cargo pod and we will give you a ride to the surface. Corporal Stram, we would like you to fly escort for us on reentry."

"Roger that," answered Stram.

The Aires pulled up alongside and the VHT maneuvered itself into the cargo pod with the help of Stram's battloid mode

alpha. The door closed behind it and the Aires was ready to head for the surface.

The shuttle called Robert and said, "We are en route to your position at this time. Two survivors, one onboard, one flying escort."

The very presence of a central government on Peryton was a relatively new development. In LaTumb, the capitol city, a large white building had been constructed to house the new government. In the courtyard in front of the building, a pair of statues had been erected. Standing side-by-side, twenty-foot tall statues in the likenesses of Burak and Tesla silently greeted all who came to do business in the new building. The unlikely pair were renowned as the planet's saviors.

With the curse lifted, the streets of the capitol had been cleaned up. The slums were gone, for the most part, and the beginnings of a global economy had taken root. The whine of sirens warning the inhabitants to take cover no longer accompanied the rise of Umbra each morning, however, most Perytonians were still nocturnal.

The young, hornless Perytonian youth at the communications console in the capitol building responded to Wildcard's call, "REF forces, we are in desperate need of help. We have already contacted the REF forces on Tirol for assistance. We are currently awaiting their response. We would be happy to relay any messages you might have for them."

Wildcard asked what his reply should be, "Robert, they have already sent out a message asking for assistance. They ask if we need to relay any message." He paused for a second and then continued, "Here's a thought, lets ask them to send the entire Mars division fleet. That should just about do it."

Robert replied to Wildcard, "Tell the Perytonians that it is imperative that the REF knows that the Masters have a factory satellite. That should even bring the SDF-3 itself here to help, well, probably not but they should definitely know the extent of the threat present."

The Aires came into view high overhead with an alpha flying escort as it approached. It landed near the crashed Roosevelt, and the alpha set down beside it. The left cargo pod opened and out came the hovertank in battloid mode.

The Aires radioed, "Sergeant, lets get whatever salvage you have loaded quickly. If the masters tracked our reentry, they may deduce that we are salvaging the wreckage and try to destroy it."

Robert answered, "Roger that, Aires. We'll begin immediately."

Gia took off for the Hive in her RCB with Nape trailing behind her in his alpha. As she left, she asked, "Where should I meet up with you after I have finished at the hive?"

Robert answered, "Meet us back at the rec. center, the casino, but look for us near, not in it. We do not want to be too close to it if they start bombarding the place, and Gia, be careful."

Robert didn't add that last bit on a whim. For some reason, he was apprehensive about letting her leave. Maybe he felt responsible for the destruction of the hive and simply didn't want to see any more Invid die because of his actions. No, that wasn't quite it. He couldn't really put his finger on it, but for some reason he was feeling a bit protective of her.

Robert then started to load the salvaged pieces into the shuttle. Matthews and Stram helped. The task was finished quickly, mostly because there simply wasn't much to salvage. Robert thanked his two helpers and said, "Now, let's get out of

here, we'll do formal introductions at our next destination, the rec. center, where we'll get some chow and a little rest."

When Nape arrived at the hive with Gia, his radar detected her RCB on a ridge next to a large valley. He landed next to her and asked her what she was looking at.

Gia said, "This is no valley. It's a crater. My hive used to be here. There, where the water is. It's all gone."

Nape used his alpha's telescopic optical enhancement feature to view the area. Indeed, he could see on the far side of the valley, approximately sixty miles away, a ridge identical to the one they were standing on. There were wildfires all around as the surrounding forest burned. Following the ridge with his eyes, he could see that it completely encircled the valley. The ridge dropped off approximately fifteen hundred feet to the valley floor below them. The deepest part of the crater was beginning to fill with water, forming a lake about six miles across in the very center of the crater valley. The rock, still hot from being hit by the proton cannon, caused the newly formed lake to steam. It looked as if it might actually be boiling in places.

Gia, after a short while of silence, said, "I have heard of such things. But I have never seen destruction of this scale before. This is what the Masters are capable of.... and they have only just begun."

*The results of the poll to determine the type of recreation facility to be constructed are finally in. The vast majority of personnel cast their vote for a Las Vegas style resort/casino. You all know that our budget for this construction project is quite strict, however, it seems that due to the poor state of the Perytonian economy, REF credit goes a long way here. I am happy to report that we will be breaking ground on the facility, to be located on the shore of scenic Boonta Lake, next week. Check the bulletin board regularly for updates on the construction as it progresses. With luck, it will be open for business in about a month.*

*JAMES CATO, COLONEL, REF  
Commander*

## **Chapter Nine**

**Reara and Wildcard were still at the crash site of the Horizon-t.** Umbra had been down for some time now. It was necessary to use spotlights to search through the wreckage and pull out the salvageable equipment. In the dark of the Perytonian night, they noticed the headlight of a Perytonian land speeder approaching from the direction of the village.

Wildcard called the approaching land speeder with his radio. The reply was, "Corporal Wildcard, this is Chronma. I saw your search lights and thought I would see if you needed

any help."

"I don't know what help you could offer, but you are more than welcome to join us," Wildcard replied.

About fifteen minutes later, the Aires set down about a hundred yards to the south of the crashed shuttle and Robert, Alex, Xavier, Jason, and the newest member of the team, Stram, landed next to it in their mecha. After they set down, Chronma approached them, seeming pleased to see the group was still alive. The cargo door opened and out walked Matthews' hovertank in battloid mode.

Robert introduced himself to Matthews, filled him in on current events and told him of their plans. Matthews told him about being blown off the surface of the Roosevelt during the battle and thanked him and his team for the rescue.

Wildcard sent another message to the Perytonian government. He wanted the REF informed that they should not fire on any Invid in the area, since Gia was now a part of their group. Robert overheard the transmission and praised Wildcard for his foresight.

The communications technician at LaTumb replied, "We will see what we can do, but as you can imagine, we are somewhat busy here."

Reara said to Chronma over the external speakers, "Hi honey did you miss your Zentraedi sweetheart?"

"Reara, how.... nice to see you. It would seem that your dreams have come true. Killed many of the enemy, have you?"

Reara responded, "Some. The children safe?"

Chronma said, "As safe as anyone can be with that thing in our sky."

Reara, in an uncharacteristically calm voice said, "Don't worry, the boss has a plan to kick the pants off those party

crashers. We will do all we can to make short work of them. Trust Robert, he is the man for the job."

Chronma greeted Robert warmly and asked what help he could provide.

Robert told Chronma, "It is good to see you too, old friend. I didn't have the chance to thank you for the help you gave us on our last battle here. We could sure use some help in getting the two extra cargo pods back to the rec. center. Also, if there are any volunteers that would be willing to go there to help us repair our fighters, that would help a lot."

Chronma told Robert, "My friend, you should know that my people have no affinity for your human mecha. Our technology works differently. We can do little to repair your mecha I am afraid. The death of Brian was a truly great loss. As for the people of my village, they have mostly fled. They fear that the Masters will vaporize the village because of the proximity of the crashed shuttle. You did us a favor by transporting us back to our homes; we wish to return the favor, so I will arrange to have the cargo pods delivered to the Casino tomorrow morning. Moving the pods is in both our interests. But what other help we can provide, I do not know. Some food perhaps?"

Robert thanked Chronma and graciously accepted the help he offered. Once they had done all they could do, the team left for the rec. center.

Aboard the Robotech factory, Kondar reported, "The humans continue to elude us, Masters. What shall we do about them?" The light of the numerous monitors on his control panel reflected in his purple eyes. All three of the clone masters were tall and slender, with shoulder length brown hair.

Baz replied, "We shall offer them a gift. Something deadly, and yet irresistible. Begin scanning the orbital debris and the wreckage of their mother ship. There must be something we can use as bait."

At the crater where the hive used to be, Nape suggested that he and Gia should be moving on soon.

Gia said, "You are right, we should be going. Nothing will be accomplished by staying here, and there is much to be done."

They both left for the Casino and arrived there after only a few hours journey. The trip was uneventful. When they arrived, there was no sign of the rest of the team yet. They assumed that the rest of the team was still loading supplies at the Horizon-t crash site.

They observed the casino from a distance. The lights were off, it was very dark. The structure seemed to be totally in tact. They wondered why the Masters hadn't blasted it yet.

Gia said, "I have a very bad feeling about this. It smells of a trap."

Robert and the team arrived at the rec. center shortly after Nape and Gia. They quickly set up camp on the side of the lake opposite the casino using the cargo pods as shelter.

Before everyone went to do their freshening up and make dinner arrangements Robert called the group to attention and announced, "We were sent a message from the Roosevelt shortly before they were shot down. Reara, Jason DeKirk, and Swift Wildcard, front and center."

The three walked to the front of the group, wondering why they had been singled out. Reara was sure she was about to be reprimanded for her harsh words to Gia earlier in the day. Then Robert continued his announcement, "The three of you have

been promoted to the rank of corporal."

The rest of the team applauded and yelled their congratulations to the three promotees. Once the commotion died down, Robert shook their hands and congratulated them himself and allowed them to return to where they had been.

Robert continued, saying "I would also like to officially welcome to the team: Corporals Stram and Matthews, alpha pilot, and hovertank pilot, respectively. Your skills will be very valuable in defeating the Masters, not to mention keeping us alive. Now, I won't delay you anymore since I know everyone is dead tired and plenty hungry. Get some food and rest, it's a luxury we have not had often in the last few days."

As the group went their separate ways, Robert then called aside the crew of the Aires, as well as Matthews and Stram. He asked the hovertank pilot, "Can you take first watch tonight? Everyone else is exhausted."

Matthews agreed and then Robert addressed the Horizon-t crew and alpha pilot, "During this first watch I have a small task for you, the REF base was destroyed by the Invid two days ago, but some supplies might have survived, I want you to go there and scavenge what you can and let me know if there is equipment worth getting. Be sure to get back in time to get some rest. If it takes too long to load up the equipment, just note what it is and we'll get it tomorrow."

They agreed and Corporal Stram and the Aires left to search the ruins of the REF base to the south.

After sending the teams off on their missions and making sure everyone was settled down for the night, Robert took off his clothes, folded them, and placed them near the shore of the lake. He dove in to refresh himself. The water was cold in the fall evening. His feet sank a few inches into the sand of the lake

bottom as he quickly rinsed off the sweat and grime of the last few days.

As he enjoyed his brief intermission from the war, he stared up into the stars above. He had learned in his brief stay on Peryton to recognize a few constellations and he took a few minutes to look for them now.

A familiar voice came from the shore. "Beautiful, don't you think?" asked Gia.

Robert replied, "Strange, and yet, at the same time familiar." Then he realized that he was standing naked in waste deep water and stooped to avoid exposing himself.

The awkwardness of the situation finally dawning on him, he asked "Wow, Gia, where did you come from?"

"I couldn't sleep. I've got a lot on my mind. Thought I would take a walk by the water to relax," she explained.

His face blushing, Robert asked "So, um, just how long were you watching me?"

"Not long," she answered.

"Did you, uh, see anything?"

"Nothing of consequence," Gia said with a smile.

Robert wondered what, exactly, she meant by that. However, the smile on her face told him far more than her words.

"What you said earlier," Gia continued, "about being the same and at the same time different. I thought that was a very provocative observation."

His eyes following the graceful curves of Gia's body, accented by the seemingly painted on Invid flight suit, Robert replied, "I wonder just how similar we are."

"We?" remarked Gia. "I had thought you were talking about the stars."

A few syllables escaped Robert's mouth, but no coherent words.

Gia turned as if to walk off, but in truth it was the only way she could think of to hide her nearly ear-to-ear smile.

Robert called, "Gia, wait!"

After quickly regaining her composure, Gia turned and said, "Yes, Robert?"

"Um, would you mind throwing me my uniform?" he asked.

"Interesting," remarked Gia, "just a moment ago you wanted to explore our 'similarities', and now you are too modest to retrieve your clothes for fear that I might see something."

Robert's face was redder than ever. He felt some relief, though, as he saw Gia pick up his folded uniform and toss it to him like a toy flying disk.

Before leaving, Gia said, "You humans certainly are curious creatures. In all seriousness, though, I really do appreciate the kindness you have shown me lately. And I must admit that it has sparked a certain curiosity in me as well."

Gia turned once again and walked slowly off in the direction of her mecha leaving Robert standing slack jawed and naked in the water, holding his uniform in his hands.

Robert's thoughts were of course of Gia. He seemed to be preoccupied with her lately and he worried that it might cost him his edge in battle.

He dressed back up and went to his alpha where he retrieved some of the emergency rations and sat down at the lakeside to enjoy his meal. It tasted somewhat like chicken and he convinced himself that it was. Some time passed, and his eyelids became heavy. He stopped eating and headed toward his

mecha. He was about to climb into the less than comfortable seat when he had an idea.

Judging that there would be no harm, he grabbed some of the 'chicken' to take to Gia. The thought of her drove the fatigue from his mind and he walked briskly to her mecha. When he arrived, he found her leaning back against the leg of her RCB, asleep.

He decided not to wake her, and set the food on her lap, where she would be sure to find it when she awoke.

He then headed back to his own mecha for some much needed sleep. Wildcard approached Robert as he prepared to turn in for the night and said, "Robert, here's a copy of the latest from the Perytonian government."

The Perytonian message read, "We relayed your message to the REF. They say they will not attack the Factory. They calculate that they would lose half the fleet in a frontal assault. They ask what the strength of your team is. The REF seems to want your team to make a surgical strike to disable the fortress. They will commit ships to a frontal attack only if the main cannon is destroyed. The position of the REF is that if it comes down to saving Earth, or destroying the factory, they would save Earth."

Robert sighed as he read. "Wildcard, let them know we'll do what we can. We'll contact LaTumb when, or should I say *if* we can take out the main cannon. They can relay our message to the REF."

"Are we up to the task, boss?" asked Wildcard.

Robert handed the paper back to Wildcard as he walked toward his alpha and said, "We'd better be. Cause nobody else is gonna do it."

Stram escorted the Aires to the ruins of the REF base. There, he found that everything on the surface was smashed. He was familiar with the layout of REF outposts and was able to locate the entrance to the underground mecha hangar with little trouble. There, he saw the remains of about a dozen mecha, all smashed by the Invid.

Above ground, the Horizon-t set down on the landing pad directly above the mecha bay and shut down its engines. The Co-pilot and one of the Communications Engineers donned cyclones and followed Stram into the mecha storage bay. The Co-pilot, corporal Jeffries, said, "What we need the most are tools. Some of the team's mecha have sustained extensive damage. We need to do some serious repairs. As for weapons, I think we are fully stocked."

Stram searched for tools first and foremost but also looked over the smashed mecha for any salvageable parts or weapons, taking note of everything that could be of some use.

The two men in cyclones entered the human sized door at the southwestern corner of the room and moved into the corridor beyond. Stram went through a mecha-sized door and found himself in a large repair bay. There were two alphas in fighter mode, raised up on lifts for easy access to the lower side. One was smashed, almost to the point of being unrecognizable. The other was missing various components, and had no Protoculture power cells, but it was not damaged by whatever smashed the rest of the mecha. On the south wall was a large red tool bin on rollers. Next to it were the bloody remains of one of the maintenance technicians. He seemed to have been running for a weapon when he was shot. On the workbench that ran the length of the eastern wall was an M-37 Weasel auto-pistol. In the

corner of the room Stram found a welding torch.

A message came in from Corporal Yamaguchi, pilot of the Aires, "Corporal Stram, What's the status of the recon on the base?"

Stram replied, "I have found several tools and the remains of two alphas one is completely crushed and the other is missing parts. We may be able to salvage them but there is no excess Protoculture. Please advise what to do with the alpha. It's been a while since I've heard from the two techs that are searching the complex with me."

Yamaguchi said, "Pack the two alphas up to take for salvage. Also, radio the other two cyclone riders with you to see what they've come up with, return as soon as you are done in there."

"Roger that. Stram out."

Overhearing Stram's conversation, Jeffries said, "We found the kitchen, there's still plenty of food here. You want to take some of it back with us? Also, the armory is caved in, there's no way to get to it. What else would you like us to search for?"

Stram said, "Yes, go ahead and take as much of the food as you can carry. You can never have too many supplies. Go and see what else you can find, especially any survivors. If you happen to come upon any enemy forces do not engage."

Standing in the mecha repair bay, Stram could see nothing else that looked salvageable. The two cyclone clad Aires crewmembers told him that they were having no better luck. The rest of the underground compound was caved in and inaccessible.

Jeffries said, "Hey Stram, there's nothing else we can do here. We're gonna start loading this food into the Aires. We'll see you on the surface."

"Right. I'll need some help with these tools and parts too," said Stram.

The two techs soon showed up to help Stram move the two alphas. They looked at the situation for a while and finally said, "I think the only way we can get these things outa here is to drag them."

Stram agreed and they located some chains, which they wrapped around the crippled alpha fighters. They attached the chains to their cyclones and together were able to drag them into the mecha bay and out the main hangar door to the Aires.

They loaded them into the cargo pods along with the tools and food. The two helpers transformed their cyclones back into motorcycle mode and stowed them in the cargo pods for the flight back to the rec. center. The Horizon-t lifted off and headed slowly off to the north with Stram flying escort.

Back at the campsite, the red light of the rising sun fell upon the lake and the rec. center on the far side. In the center of the courtyard in front of the casino, there could be seen a large mecha. It looked like an REF MAC III. The MAC III, known as the "Monster" was the REF's most heavily armed and armored mecha. The non-transformable giant had three mammoth forty-centimeter autocannons mounted on top and in place of arms it had huge particle beam cannons capable of dishing out destruction on a grand scale. It was sitting still in the courtyard and the team's scans indicated that it was powered down. Telescopic enhancement showed scorch marks on the armor of the mecha and it seemed to be leaning to its left in a precarious manner. There was no other movement in the area of the casino.

Wildcard yelled, "Who the hell is that?", and jumped into his mecha, powered it up and took aim. "We can't be too careful,

for all we know, a Master could be driving it."

Nape said to the group, "Calm down. We should do a quick recon of that thing. Seems like a cyclone would be best. I'll go. Keep me covered."

Nape proceeded to don his CVR-3 armor, and readied his cyclone for deployment.

Jason hopped into his logan and powered it up. Wildcard, already in his beta, transformed to battloid mode, saying, "If it so much as looks at me funny, I'll blast it to hell three times before it falls."

Corporal Matthews said, "I know I'm new here, but I'm going to venture a suggestion. Perhaps we could call it on the radio?"

Reara who was dozing off in the back seat of the pod yawned and mumbled, "What the hell, let's do like Matthews says. After all, it's one of ours."

Nape agreed, "Good idea Matt. But I'm still putting on CVR-3 armor while Robert is thinking of what to do."

Robert, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes and stretching from a fitful sleep, stared at the MAC III and said, "Hold on! We don't need to come out with guns blazing and reveal our position just yet. Corporal Mathews is right, we should try to contact it first, but we'll do it after taking a defensive posture. I don't want to get caught with my pants down, so everyone suit up and get ready. Then we'll contact it and if it does not answer we'll go and explore, but with someone covering us."

With that, Robert suited up in his CVR-3 and removed the battler cyclone from the shadow alpha and activated it. He then rode out approximately a mile from the camp before transmitting on an open frequency:

"REF destroid in vicinity of the casino, this is Sergeant

Robert Farino chief of the Casino security team. Please identify yourself."

No reply came from the Mac III. It remained motionless. Robert then sent in a coded frequency to all the team: "Keep your eyes open, Mathews, Wildcard and Rera, you are our cover fire in case we need it. Rera, start monitoring the frequencies the masters might use, just in case. Now, we wait for an answer, if none is given, we carefully approach the center, understood?"

The rest of the team acknowledged Robert. Wildcard took to the air, transforming onto guardian mode, saying, "Just give the word and I'll fry that thing up for breakfast."

He flew in circles around the rec. center and set his scanners to search for any other mecha which may have been hidden. They turned up nothing.

Wildcard said, "I just hope it's not a trap, I'd hate to blast this marvelous piece of destructive machinery. It could come in handy against the Masters!"

With no response from the MAC III, Nape activated the power of his cyclone and waited for Robert's go ahead.

Robert said to the team, "Nape, you're alpha is a recon version, right? Can you run a check with your sensors and scan for life signs near the destroid? Everyone else keep your eyes open and keep your distance. I smell a trap."

Nape climbed up to the cockpit of his alpha and turned on the sensors. He detected no life signs.

Rubbing the sleep from her eyes and brushing the orange locks from her face, Rera scanned the MAC III with all the sensors her pod had. Placing the helmet of the CVR-3 armor on her head she noted the registration number on the destroid's hull. Thinking quickly she ran this code though the data from the

onboard combat computer for ID and origin. "This is a damned trap!" she thought to herself. A flip of a switch and a quick change of channels and the radio scanned the frequencies used by the Robotech Masters with no results.

Reara said "Boss stay away from that mecha, it's got the firepower to take you out in one shot. I think this is an ambush."

Her search for the serial number turned up some surprising information. The computer came up with a match. It was assigned to the Ikazuchi Command Carrier SCB-58 UES Roosevelt. That made some sense, since that was the ship that had been destroyed in orbit, but it didn't explain how it had gotten here.

Reara advised her companions, "Warriors, fan out, if the bandit is hostile, let's force him to pick one target and not attack us bunched up in a group."

"Sound advice," agreed Robert.

Nape's sensor scans came up with nothing. No heat, no life signs, and no other mecha in the area.

Thinking to herself, Reara noted that while destroid's are space worthy they aren't able to land from space. She had not previously targeted the Mecha since it should be a friendly. Now the combat computer displayed on her HUD was confirming a "lock." How did this monster get here? Surely a mecha this size would have made the kind of noise to wake the dead if it had fallen out of the sky. She thought the impact tremors the mecha made when it walked should have set off the motion detectors on her pod. "I didn't sleep though that!!" she thought to herself. What the hell were the Masters up to? She couldn't see tracks from her vantage point, what could have brought this thing to us so silently? She tried to master her urge to destroy the MAC. It seemed to be a trap and she longed to remove it, but not with out

the go from Robert.

Nape, in his cyclone armor, began to sneak slowly up on the stationary MAC III. He called back to the team, "Robert, be ready to cover my butt if it starts lighting me up."

"We've got your back," came the reply.

As he got closer, he noticed that the ground around the MAC III had been disturbed. It was as if there were mecha-sized footprints that were somehow filled in or raked over in order to conceal them. There were no MAC sized footprints at all, meaning that there is no way the thing walked there. It must have been placed there by whatever left the smaller footprints. Approaching to within a hundred feet, he still got no response from the MAC. It seemed to be totally powered down.

Reara said, "Worry not Corporal Nape, I have your six, but don't touch it though, it may be rigged to blow."

Wildcard voiced an idea, "Robert, should I jam all possible radio signals that the Masters may try to use to remote control the big guy, that is, if they are controlling it."

Jason disagreed, "Robert, we've already checked for Masters' transmissions to no avail. I think that would be a waste of time and probably give away our position."

Nape approached the base of the main building. He was about fifty feet from the MAC. He could not hear anything, nor were there any radio transmissions that he could make out. All he could see was the disturbed ground around the MAC. In the sky to the south, the team could see the Aires approaching. Stram had finished with his recon of the REF base.

Chronma also entered the area, driving a large tractor like vehicle, which hovered a few feet off the ground, very much like Matthews' tank. The large hovering vehicle was towing two Horizon-t cargo pods.

Reara called out to Chronma using her mecha's external speakers, saying "Chronma, be careful. We've got a situation here. You should keep your distance until we've got things under control."

Chronma responded, "Reara, are you actually concerned for my safety? My, how you have changed!"

"Whatever!" laughed Reara, "I was just worried about the cargo pods. It would be a shame to lose them. They are packed with all kinds of useful stuff."

Chronma grumbled, "Reara says it's useful, must be guns."

At that time, Stram and the Horizon-t arrived and set down near the edge of the lake. They noticed the shadow beta flying around as if looking for something, and someone in cyclone armor sneaking up on a strangely posed MAC III. The rest of the team was spread out, watching their comrade sneak up on the motionless mecha.

Reara, in a stroke of genius, decided to review the surveillance video from the rec. center's security cameras. She downloaded the footage to the pod's onboard computer and watched. It didn't take long to come across something strange. Just after sunset, and long before the arrival of the team, a large Robotech Master ship set down in the courtyard. The ship was so huge that it filled the view screen entirely so that she could only see a portion of it. A large door opened and six bioroids wrestled the MAC III out the door and placed it in the middle of the courtyard. They had a heck of a time trying to balance it on its feet because the feet were positioned awkwardly, leading her to believe it was adrift in space when they found it. Once it was set up, they opened the crew entrance hatch and placed a strangely familiar metallic sphere inside, along with a device that she didn't recognize. They then closed the hatch with

extreme gentleness and began to rake the sand around with various tools in an effort to mask their footprints. They moved back into their ship and the door closed behind them. Then the ship lifted off and departed, seemingly straight up into the sky.

As Stram entered the area, he asked, "What is going on here? Why is everyone so cautious of that MAC III?"

Nape asked Robert, "Do you want me to jump up on the thing and open the hatch?"

Reara, stunned by what the cameras had shown her, yelled "Nape, get the hell out of there!"

The assault pod suddenly sprang into motion as it snatched Chronma from the hover truck and flew at Robert with its thrusters on full tilt.

Reara continued yelling to the team, "Wildcard catch Nape and evac! It's a nuke! Stram get that shuttle the hell outa here! Abort, abort! There is a nuke in the MAC!"

*Most people are only aware of the REF outpost on the Earth's moon. This was by far the largest, but not the only REF outpost in the Sol system. While the Moon offered a superb rallying point before assaulting the Earth, its proximity to the enemy was a liability. That is why the Mars Base was set up. Its distance from Earth offered the benefit of reduced possibility of detection. Smaller than the Moon Base, it was designed to be a backup in case the Invid detected and destroyed the lunar staging area.*

*History of the Third Robotech War, Vol. IV*

## **Chapter Ten**

**The team evacuated quickly toward the west, not** stopping until they reached the edge of the great forest, more than a hundred miles away. Robert didn't leave immediately. Instead, he paused to make sure none of his people were left behind, and his instincts were correct. Drakinn began riding away from the site on his cyclone and Robert offered to pick him up with his alpha. The alpha being about ten times faster than the cyclone, Drakinn gratefully accepted and they met up with the rest of the group at the edge of the great forest.

Robert looked the group over to make sure everyone had made it and asked, "Hey, where's Gia?"

"Right here!" she answered.

"Ok, good," Robert said, sounding very relieved.

The group took a minute to think about all the things that were left behind at the casino. They had left everything that they had worked so hard to salvage from the two crash sites. They still had the Aires and that was something, but most of their weapons were still in the cargo pods by the lake.

The team all climbed out of their mecha and gathered round to see what plan Robert would come up with to get back all their gear and supplies. In truth, Robert hadn't even thought about it yet. He had been so pre-occupied with making sure everyone was safe, that this was the first time he had thought of the cargo pods and mecha.

Wildcard was the first to speak, "Reara, are you sure there was a Nuke in there? And Robert, did the Aires bring our ammo supply or was it left back there? If it was, I'd like to volunteer to go back and retrieve it, not to mention Nape's alpha."

Reara shot to her feet and yelled, "Yes I'm sure there is a nuke in there! If you doubt my word, then I suggest you go and check it out for yourself!"

Nape asked Reara, "So exactly what did you download from rec. center? Did it show what or who placed the nuke there?"

Reara answered, "Yes, it was the Masters. They placed it there before we arrived."

Concerned about his alpha, Nape suggested, "I could retrieve my alpha alone. I may need one body to cover me while I load the cyclone and power up my alpha. I hate to leave my ship back there. It is in top shape except for a few scratches. It

is your call, Robert, but we will need all our mecha to take on the Masters."

Stram also volunteered to return to the casino to retrieve Nape's alpha.

Reara now turned to Chronma and said, "Sorry for the rough treatment. I assumed you didn't want to be toast." With amusement in her voice, she remarked, "Was I wrong?"

Chronma said, "No Reara, in fact I suppose I owe you a debt of gratitude. I guess I may have misjudged you."

Chronma's admission brought a great sense of satisfaction to Reara. In her heart, she forgave him for the last few months of constant bickering and argument, but no such words escaped her lips. She was far too proud for that.

Reara then turned to face the abandoned rec. center. *The mecha is needed if we are to destroy the space factory*, she thought to herself. Then it struck her... The plan to take out the factory satellite. "Oh yea, this is great!" she exclaimed, "There's the way to take out the factory without being detected by its defense net!"

"Well, Reara, spill it. What's this plan you've got?" asked Robert

Reara explained, "We take *our* nuke in the shadow beta. The factory's sensors shouldn't be able to detect it. Then we drop it off on the exterior of the factory at the main cannon with the timer set to blow shortly after we get clear. They wouldn't even know we were there until it was too late!"

Robert added, "That should work, but we might have an even better chance of success if we create some kind of diversion."

Now quite satisfied with herself for conceiving the team's plan for thwarting the Masters, Reara called to Wildcard, "Hey,

I'm downloading the camera files from the rec. center so you can see for yourself. Maybe you can identify the other object. I also think you should see this Nape."

She turned to face Chronma again, saying, "My Sergeant and his warriors are in great need of a meal Chronma. Our rations just don't cut it after four days my friend. Can you arrange breakfast? I would consider your debt paid in full, and before I forget, you are welcome."

Chronma replied, "For this... You can eat at my house. That is if you are willing to venture into a major population center. My government feels that they may be major targets. If only we could use the kitchen at the rec. center, but that is perhaps even more dangerous, with that nuke there."

Robert suggested, "Before we go risk ourselves to retrieve the equipment we should all check the data from the center's computer. If Reara could see the bomb on these downloads, maybe we can determine what kind of trigger it has. That way we could know how risky it would be to get close again"

Reara sent the download to all the team, and they watched it together. As the team watched the footage, Robert and Reara talked between themselves about their espionage training. Drakinn listened in, he too knew much about the enemy and their tactics. Together they took their best guess at the device left behind with the nuke. It could be a motion detector of some kind. This would detonate the nuke when the crew hatch on the MAC was opened. It would also cause the nuke to go off if the MAC was moved. Another possibility is that it was a light detector, which would cause the nuke to go off when the hatch was opened and the light of day shined into the cockpit. They rule out the possibility that it was a timer since Robert explained that the Nuke would be equipped with a built in timer. They

also concluded that the device was not a transmitter since their scanners did not detect any type of signals.

Wildcard said, "Well, at least we know it won't blow up unless we come too close to it, so I still suggest we go back for our supplies, and soon too. After we grab our supplies and the mecha, I suggest we proceed with an attack on the factory. Let's strike fast and soon, disable their main cannon and call the fleet to give us a hand. It's the only way we will get out of here alive. If we wait too long the fleet will leave us behind when they leave for Earth."

Leaning back on his chair and waiting for a couple of seconds, Wildcard continued, "Robert, why haven't they fired on us with the factory's main gun? While we were resting last night they had a clean shot at us, Why not get rid of us then, and what happened to the Invid, were they *all* killed?"

Robert yelled at Wildcard, "Hey, try to be a little more sensitive! Gia's lost everyone. I'm sure they were quite literally family to her."

Surprised by Robert's reaction, Wildcard said, "Wow, I didn't know you cared so much about the slugs, boss."

Robert, now losing his patience with Wildcard, said, "That slug is one of us now. A member of our team. And I expect you to treat her as such. Understand?"

Reara stepped between them and tried to answer Wildcard's original question, "Ever try to kill a mosquito with a rocket launcher, Wildcard?" Reara asked with a smile on her face. "The main cannon is so big it can't target individual mecha, we're just too small. However if we move into an area where the cannon can blast a larger object like a city, they can target us by using the city as a reference point. So, if we assume the nuke is set off by motion we should recover the mecha and supplies

so we can begin with the plan to disable the main cannon. The factory has not folded yet but that could change. It is more likely a fleet is being created. So every day we delay gives them more firepower. Let's get moving already!"

With her little speech finished, she gave Robert a sidelong glance to let him know that his comments about the Invid did not go unnoticed.

Gia, listening from the cockpit of her RCB responded to Wildcard, "Yes, Wildcard, the Masters have utterly destroyed the hive. When Nape and I arrived there, all we saw was a crater. It was miles across and more than a mile deep. There were no survivors. As for why the masters haven't blasted us yet, I can only guess they were hoping we would open up that MAC and destroy ourselves."

Nape agreed, "That makes sense, Gia. And Robert, I insist on retrieving my alpha. It's top priority to me. As for the video feed, it shows no detail other than them messing around the MAC. So I would think the rest of the rec. center should be safe. I recommend one or two people go with me to get my ship."

Robert agreed, but advised extreme caution. He ordered Wildcard to accompany Nape back to the rec. center to retrieve his mecha. "Nobody is to go within a hundred meters of that MAC!" he ordered.

Nape transformed his cyclone to motorcycle mode and drove off in the direction of the rec. center. Wildcard followed, with his beta in guardian mode. The beta's guardian mode resembled a giant robotic bird with outstretched wings and two large legs hanging beneath it like an eagle about to pluck a fish from a quickly moving stream. It was a bizarre sight, even if one was used to being around veritech mecha.

When Nape and Wildcard arrived at the rec. center, they

found the two cargo pods from the crashed Horizon-t where they had been delivered to the team's campsite by Chronma. Next to the cargo pods was Nape's recon alpha in guardian mode. The legs were bent so that the nose nearly touched the ground and the canopy was open just as Nape had left it when he climbed out and put on his cyclone.

Looking across the lake, Nape and Wildcard saw the MAC III still standing motionless in the courtyard. It was now mid day and the sky was beginning to fill with storm clouds and a cold swift wind was building.

Back at the edge of the forest, Chronma said, "This storm should give us some cover. The factory will not be able to target us. I think it would be safe to venture into my village if you want to take me up on that offer for some hot food. Also, Robert, I think I do have a friend who spent a considerable amount of time down in the mecha bay with Brian. He might have picked up some skills which would be useful to you. I wouldn't consider him an electrical engineer, but he can work on your technology well enough."

Robert nodded his head and said, "All right Chronma, thank you for the information. Your man may not be a technician per se, but he'll have to do. Have him meet us outside of the village so we can start repairing the shadow systems of my alpha, and salvaging the systems of the damaged mecha we found. And by the way, could you have him bring that hot meal you were talking about? No coffee though, if Reara gets any more stimulants into her system, she is likely to start paying heed to the little voices in her head."

Reara laughed at Robert's comment and responded merrily, "But boss, the little voices give good advice. They say *The*

*Robotech Masters are the scum of the galaxy. Kill them!"*

Chronma contacted his friend and learned some disturbing news. He relayed to Robert that the Masters had set up some kind of "facility" in the mountains west of the Village. Chronma elaborated, "The facility is heavily guarded and starships can be seen landing and taking off on a regular basis. The ships are large, over five hundred meters long, and there are at least two of them since they go and come too quickly for there to be only one."

When Reara heard Chronma's bad news she suggested, "Sergeant, my advice is to blow the MAC III as soon as the boys are clear of the blast. Then I'll take Wildcard with me and recon that facility in the mountains."

Robert told Reara that her plan made sense. Detonating the MAC might make the Masters think that the team had been destroyed. Then he radioed Wildcard, "See if you can get the hover tractor with the extra cargo pods, we will need them"

Wildcard agreed, and proceeded to the abandoned tractor near the two cargo pods.

Wildcard suggested to Nape, "I might be able to tie a line to my mecha and pull the tractor, but I'd need to fly very low and slow on guardian mode, I'd also need some one to keep an eye out form above in case we get some unexpected visitors"

Wildcard was successful in attaching a rather large tow cable, which he found in the tractor. His mecha was able to pull the cargo pods, but it was difficult. Flying about ten feet off the ground, he was able to make about fifteen miles per hour safely.

Robert addressed the rest of the team, "The facility and those ships, even though a serious worry, are secondary targets. Our main goal is to disable, disrupt, or destroy the factory satellite. Once we do that, those ships will have nowhere to go.

Unless anyone has a way to include the destruction of the ships and facility into the plan, I suggest that we press on with the repairs and the main attack"

Stram suggested that as soon as the alpha was recovered, a reconnaissance of the facility should be done. Robert agreed and added, "I suppose that if it turns out to be a soft target, it might make a suitable diversion for our attack on the space factory. We'll see."

Nape flew cover for Wildcard while he drug the cargo pods back to where the rest of the team was waiting. When they finally arrived, they found the rest of the team discussing tactics. Robert updated them on the discovery of the mountain facility and the ships that have been sighted going and coming from it.

As Nape and Wildcard listened, rain began to fall and quickly became a deluge. The team, along with Chronma and Gia, enjoying some time out of their mecha, ran into an open cargo pod. Outside, the wind picked up and flashes of lightning briefly illuminated the swaying trees of the nearby forest.

Nape disappointedly said, "Well Wildcard, looks like more cold survival rations for lunch."

Gia, who had been thinking quietly about the mountain facility for a while now, broke her long silence to put forth some of her ideas.

"They might be mining," she said. "The ships could be transporting raw materials to the factory. I fear that if we wait much longer, they will have a fleet waiting for us up there."

Chronma responded, "That would explain why they haven't left orbit yet. Also, we should be careful, if this wind picks up much more, it might knock that MAC III over and set off the bomb."

"That's the idea Chronma, " Rera explained, "Make the Masters believe we are dead. Then catch them with their pants down."

Robert filled the newcomers in on his plan, "Nape, Wildcard, you've heard that the Masters have set up some kind of facility on the mountains and have what appear to be several ships coming and going from orbit. I believe we should eat and make repairs while the storm knocks the MAC down and then have most of our team to go disrupt, and maybe even destroy whatever it is the Masters are doing in the mountains. In the meantime the shadow Alpha-Beta combo can break atmosphere on their own so they can sneak up on the factory and plant a nuke of our own."

Drakinn, still in his cyclone asked, "Hey, is there any chance we can piece together another alpha from the parts we have in the shuttle? I'm tired of this cyclone. I miss out on all the good stuff. Even though the CADS are pretty cool."

Robert told Drakinn that he would do what he could to piece together another alpha, but the damage to the team's mecha was so severe that the salvaged mecha from the base would most likely be cannibalized to get their current fighters repaired.

Drakinn wasn't pleased by this announcement. He began to feel a certain amount of resentment for Robert and the rest of the team well up inside him, although he did not act on these feelings, he did not say much for the rest of the meeting.

Hearing the need for an alpha to go against the Masters' facility, both Alex and Xavier volunteered at the same time. Alex said, "Come on boss, let me go on this one. I haven't taken down a single bad guy this whole mission!"

Xavier countered his friend's proposal with, "You've caused

us enough trouble already, Alex! Come on Sergeant, let me take this one."

Alex got the final word in. "Sarge, come on, let me make up for my previous mistake. I can do this!"

Robert told them that they could both participate in the attack on the mountain facility. Furthermore, Robert announced that he and Wildcard would fly the shadow fighters against the factory.

Wildcard was both honored to be selected for such an important job, and at the same time felt that he had just been picked for a suicide mission.

Robert continued, "Everyone should top off their ammo from the cargo pods. Speaking of the shuttle, it is a prime target. We should hide it before the attacks begin. Also, those of you with less mobile mecha, Drakinn in his cyclone and Matthews in his hovertank, will go with the shuttle and guard it at its hiding place."

Drakinn said, "Of course. In the rear with the gear. Why would I expect anything else."

The rest of the team was quiet for a minute, each contemplating their assignments. Wildcard, feeling a need to lighten the atmosphere, said, "If I don't get some food soon, my stomach's gonna dissolve my spine."

Chronma offered, "I think there is an oven in the shuttle galley, and there is a ton of food in the left cargo pod. I'll start heating up some food for you guys."

In the meantime, Rera pulled Robert aside and quietly voiced some concerns. "I think we might have a spy amongst us. How else would the Masters know we were going to the rec. center?"

Robert was totally taken off guard by the comment. The

thought of a traitor in their midst had never crossed his mind. Even the thought of Gia, their sworn enemy, betraying them was somewhat unrealistic to him.

“No, I really don’t think so,” Robert said. “I mean, we’re all REF here, except for Gia and Chronma. Gia is definitely not in league with the Masters, that’s obvious. They killed hundreds, probably thousands of her people when they took out the hive. And we’ve known Chronma for a long time now. I know you don’t really like him, but have you ever had reason to question his loyalty?”

“No, I haven’t. But if not him, then who?” she asked.

“Look, if I were the Masters, I would probably have done the same thing. The rec. center is our largest source of weapons and supplies right now. It only makes sense to booby trap it.”

“That’s not all, boss. I’ve got a feeling. My instincts are telling me there’s something not right here,” Reara explained.

Robert shaking his head, told Reara “Look, until we’ve got something a little more solid to go on, I’m afraid there isn’t much I can do. Sorry.”

Chronma emerged from the Horizon-t with five large pizzas and said, "I asked the crew which kind of human food was best for galley preparation, and I was told that this pizza would be acceptable. I hope there are no objections?"

"Dude, you rock!" exclaimed Alex.

The four-man crew of the Aires dragged crates of missiles and other items into a circle so that they could sit on them and talk while they ate. The rest of the team grabbed some pizza and pulled up crates of their own. Reara went to sit next to Robert, as she had many times in the chow hall back at the base, but she was cut off. Robert pulled up two crates of limpet mines and motioned for Gia to sit with him. Reara was shocked. She

thought to herself, *He's gonna eat dinner with that slug? It's almost enough to make me lose my appetite!*

After quickly eating his pizza, Nape excused himself and ran out through the pouring rain into the other cargo pod to see what he could find that might help him make repairs to the team's mecha. He found the remains of the two alphas salvaged from the base. Brian's AAT-40 was also secured in the cargo pod.

Nape said to himself, "Not bad, I can work with this."

As the team sat, consuming their long overdue meal Wildcard followed Nape into the other pod and asked, "Hey man, need a hand? I may not be the best mechanic, but at least I can help with the tools."

Nape told him that he could use a hand loading the tool bin into the AAT-40. That way they could drive from mecha to mecha making repairs. They loaded up the tools and were off. Although the rain was pouring about them, their CVR-3 armor kept them dry. It wasn't easy working in the clumsy armor, but it beat the alternative.

Reara finished her Pizza and then looked around the table for someone she could share some troubling thoughts with in private. Some of the faces she trusted, but didn't really know. Some of them she had known for a while, since they had been stationed here on Peryton with her. She knew Jason DeKirk, and trusted him, so she motioned for him to follow her as she left the cargo pod.

He followed her up into the nearly empty shuttle. Only one comm. technician remained onboard, monitoring the radios. In the underbelly of the ship, where the alpha fighter was normally docked, she finally stopped and motioned for Jason to come close.

“Ok, Rera. Whatcha got in mind?” Jason asked with a wink. He thought to himself, *That’s right, irresistible. Chicks just can’t get enough of me. Not even alien chicks, apparently.*

“I needed a place free from prying eyes, and ears. This should do. Nobody should be coming down here since there isn’t a fighter docked right now,” she explained.

“Right, right. Nobody need know.” Jason continued, “Aint none of their business anyway what two adult humanoids do behind closed doors.”

Immediately sensing that Jason’s mind was somewhere that she didn’t want to go, Rera was quick to correct the misguided human.

“Uhh... No. Actually I wanted to talk to you about Robert. So just make sure no part of your body touches me... or I will break it off," she cautioned Jason with an eager nod. “Now, have you noticed how he has been treating our new guest?”

Something in the back of Jason’s mind told him that he should play on Rera’s fears, so he did. His headache came back with a flash, and he began to focus on the jealousy in Rera’s voice. Something inside him told him he should play on that.

“Sure have. How could anyone miss it?” Jason began. “He treats her real special like. I mean you two used to be real close till she arrived. Now he spends all his time with her, always watching out for her, doesn’t have any time for the rest of us. He’s really preoccupied with her lately.”

“Exactly! I’m glad it’s not just me.”

“Oh no, it’s not just you. I’ll bet everyone has noticed. And it seems to be getting worse. I hope this doesn’t become a problem”

“Right, we’d better keep a close eye on him.”

“Right” Jason agreed. And with that, they went back down with the rest. Robert and Gia were still sitting next to each other, chatting it up.

A sudden blinding flash from the east alarmed the group and they stood up to see the storm clouds disappear from the sky and a brilliant fire ball rose up turning into a fiery red mushroom cloud as the MAC III exploded. The group was far enough away that they weren't in any danger from the blast. The team watched in silence as the mushroom cloud rose skyward. After it dispersed, the team could then see the clear blue sky where there had been dark clouds previously and the Factory loomed ominously in the sky above the mountains far to the west like a ghostly white shadow on the cloudless blue sky.

Reara, after the shock of the explosion had subsided, said, "The MAC III explosion was what we needed to throw off the Masters. Let them believe we are dead. Now we have a plan to wipe them out!"

Xavier took another bite of his pizza and said, "Hmmm, tastes even better now! Must be the taste of victory!"

Alex, only half joking, said "Shut up you idiot! It's probably the radiation!"

*The Robotech Masters owned several factory satellites, but being large and relatively stationary, they were easy targets for the Invid. The plan was devised to have them perform hyperspace folds at irregular intervals, folding from one location to the next in a pattern known only to the Masters. This information could be transmitted to any Zentraedi fleet in need of repairs so that they could rendezvous with one of the factories. Apparently, Peryton was one of the stops on this factory's fold pattern. I need not remind you of the production capacity of one of these factories. If the enemy is able to reactivate this station, they could be a threat as great as the Invid, possibly greater.*

*From an Intelligence briefing for Admiral Rick Hunter*

## **Chapter Eleven**

**Nape and Wildcard worked throughout most of the day.** They took what parts they needed from the salvaged mecha and pieced together a single fully functional shadow alpha. The rest of the mecha they repaired to the best of their abilities. When they finished, Robert ordered them to get a few hours of sleep and they happily complied.

When Nape and Wildcard awoke, it was night again. Robert called the entire group together and addressed them, saying "Now the time has come to set our plan in motion. We will either defeat the Masters or die trying. I believe that if everyone gives one hundred percent, we can pull this off. Before we begin, are there any questions?"

The team shook their heads and Robert continued, "Good, now break up into your respective teams and let's be off. If all goes well, this time tomorrow we will be back on Tirol enjoying a zarayba and some of the local cuisine. My treat. Now prepare to move out!"

"One problem, boss," said Alex. "I don't like zarayba."

"Actually, the good sergeant is offering my favorite kind of drink," countered Xavier.

"You like that crap, Xavier?" asked Alex.

"Zarayba? Oh heck no," said Xavier. "But free has always been my favorite kind of drink."

"Right, can't argue with that. Let's do this," said Alex.

Jason walked off to the side to look over his logan for any damage. His head was aching, and he felt compelled to find somewhere away from the rest of the group. His conscious mind was no longer in control of his actions. When he was confident that nobody was around, he thought deeply about the Masters. Onboard the Factory Satellite, they viewed his thoughts. His mind informed them that the team was still alive and planning to attack both the factory and the mountain facility.

The masters responded, "Continue to gather information. We have an assault squad standing by to attack the REF team on your command. Just give the word when they are vulnerable and we will move in. Also, we will need a way to track their cloaked mecha. Do what you can."

Jason agreed to the Masters' demands.

Before the team departed, Robert asked Chronma if he could provide any information about the masters' facility. Chronma said, "If I may use the communications gear in the ship, I can ask my government if they have anything of use. I am sure they are keeping tabs on the Masters operations."

Chronma disappeared into the Horizon-t. While he was gone, Jason took the opportunity to look over the alpha and beta that would make the assault on the factory. Again, his head throbbed with pain. While nobody was looking, he attached a small transmitter to the shadow beta. Next, Jason went back to his logan and waited in the cockpit for Chronma's news. While he was there, he informed the Masters of the plan and gave them the frequency of the transmitter he planted on the beta. The pain subsided and he snapped out of the trance like state with no memory of what he had just done.

Aboard the orbital factory, the Masters remarked on the efficiency of their spy.

Shran said, "I must admit, when we first captured him I did not think he would be of much use. It would seem that you were right."

Baz smugly replied, "Yes, it seems that my foresight has saved us from a most untimely demise. Without his help, we would not know of the impending attack."

"No doubt they would have been successful in their attempt if we had not planted DeKirk in their midst," added Dakon.

Two video screens came to life on the wall in front of the three Masters. A purple uniformed Zentraedi warrior appeared on one and a thin, blue haired clone master on the other.

Baz gave them their orders and preparations were made to

defend both the orbital factory and the mountain facility.

Chronma came back out of the Horizon-t after about ten minutes. He had a printout in his hands and gave it to Robert. Naturally, the rest of the team was curious and came over to see what Chronma had come up with. It was a satellite photo of the facility, provided by the Perytonian Government. It showed two landing pads, a cave like mine entrance, and some kind of large building. There truly wasn't much to the facility, but the size of the starship on the landing pad and the number of assault carriers present was disturbing.

Sitting in the palm of her giant battle pod's hand, Reara tried in vain to contain the antsiness she felt by playing a reed flute she come by as a child growing up in South America. She had been prematurely ejected from her clone chamber during the capture of Commander Reno's Robotech Factory. Not fully developed, she had been raised by humans at the RDF tactics school in South America and had later joined the REF. Now she thought to herself, *how silly I must look to the others*. As the melody drifted about her it soothed her somewhat. She hated this part of herself! The hunger for conflict. The endless waiting. Her eyes fell upon Nape, who would lead the assault on the mountain facility. She could contain it no longer. Taking the flute from her mouth she said to him "Let's get this over with Nape! The reaper of souls demands his bounty! It is time for you to lead us to victory or death!! The galaxy is counting on us!"

"Uh... Reara. You might try decaf. That might help."  
Replied Nape.

Robert finally gave the word, "Lets get moving, Reara's

right. Weird, but right. If all goes well, this will be the last day we spend on this planet. Now, let's move out!"

Robert and Wildcard were first to lift off. They immediately linked up and were flying up into the morning sky. Nape, Stram, Jason, Alex, Xavier, Reara, and Gia took to the sky next, leaving the Aires and its protectors behind.

Matthews and Drakinn were left to guard the shuttle. They felt some disappointment in not being on the front line of the offensive against the Masters, but they knew deep down that it was necessary. The Aires must be protected. If the Masters knew the location of the shuttle, a fight would surely ensue. Either that, or they would be instantly disintegrated by the factory's main cannon.

Matthews suggested moving the Aires, "It's been here for a while. Might be safer to move it somewhere new. We can send a coded message to the team so they know where to find us. Whaddya say Drakinn? Wanna go for a ride?"

As the formation approached the mountains, Nape briefed them on the plan of attack. With a calm steady voice, he explained, "Our mission is to draw reinforcements from the factory. We do not have the time or firepower to take out a starship. It would be a better target, yes, but we need to strike hard and fast and simply cause some confusion. We will all fire at once as soon as we are all in range. I'll call the shot. We need maximum firepower on our first pas and the element of surprise. Do not slow down to take more shots. Once we are past the site about mile or two, all units will do a 180, turn and knock down any chase bioroids on our tails. Make it fast and hard. Then we're outa there. If they give chase, and they probably will, we'll only take them on after we get out of the

line of sight of the starship's guns."

The formation approached the target and Jason kept nice and low, trying to drift to the back of the formation. Rera angled her Pod so no friendly mecha were in her path of fire.

The team was surprised at first by what they saw as the facility came within visual range. The first thing they noticed was that the starship was not on the landing pad. This was not particularly alarming since it could simply be in transit from the mine to the orbital factory. As they got closer, about a mile out, they noticed that the other landing pad, which should have had several assault carriers on it, was also empty. It would seem that the mine had no defenders at all. The only visible targets were the headquarters building and the mining pit.

Rera told Nape, "Looks like a trap, recommend we break off the attack immediately!"

At that most inconvenient of times, Jason's head throbbed with pain. It was the Masters, and they asked him, "Can you provide the location of the REF Transport? It is essential that we destroy it." Jason quickly informed them of the location.

*The REF had designed several mecha specifically for use by micronized Zentraedi. They resembled the Zentraedi's original battlepods externally, with some modifications, but had improved survivability and firepower. Initially, these mecha were accepted by the REF Zentraedi, however they proved to be far inferior to the transformable mecha used by the REF's human pilots. Initially, it was thought that this could be corrected by designing a more heavily armed and armored pod, which would be capable of transforming like the other REF mecha. The result of this upgrade was the REF Heavy Assault Pod. However, this was far too costly, especially since there was no reason that the micronized Zentraedi could not utilize the same mecha as the humans. Only a half dozen production models of the Heavy Assault Pod were ever deployed. From this point on, REF Zentraedi used human mecha such as the Alpha and Beta fighters. This practice was already implemented on Earth, where any Zentraedi who joined the Army of the Southern Cross would pilot standard Hovertanks, Logans and AJACS. The REF ZBP series of mecha became little more than a curious footnote in the history of the Robotech Wars.*

*The Complete Mecha of the Robotech Wars*

## **Chapter 12**

**In space, their alpha and beta linked up, Robert and Wildcard approached the factory. As it grew large in the sky, the**

first odd thing that they noticed was that there were two starships near the factory. They were large, on the same scale as an Ikazuchi command carrier. The thought crossed their minds that this might turn into an ugly fight if they were detected. The stealth systems in the two shadow fighters should let them in and out before these guys knew what was going on. As Robert and Wildcard got closer, within a couple of miles, they noticed something else. There were about a dozen assault carriers also positioned around the factory. It wasn't until all these ships began to converge on their supposedly cloaked shadow fighters that the two realized the Masters were on to them. Somehow, they were able to detect them!

Robert asked, "How the hell did they know we were coming!?"

In a markedly calmer voice than his commander, Wildcard said, "Alright boss, this is it, I say we stay together and go in at top speed, guns blazing. Once near the satellite, we split up and get in, drop the nuke, and get out." After a pause he added, "Oh yeah, and pray to God things don't get any worse."

Robert composed himself, then replied, "I would rather separate. If they are on to us, and it seems that they are, they may not know which of us has the bomb. Even that small bit of confusion on their part might buy us the valuable seconds we need to make this happen. You cover me while I plant the gift with a very short fuse and get the hell out of there before it blows. Get ready to blast your way in full afterburner!"

"You're the boss," said Wildcard, and he complied.

Robert separated his shadow alpha from the beta and dove for the factory's main cannon. He fired a barrage of missiles at the approaching assault carriers. The lead carrier took a direct hit and fled the battle! He felt a wave of relief wash over him as

the rest of the assault carriers did not pursue him. Wildcard had no such luck. It seemed that the entire fleet was coming after him. He was not hallucinating, they really were. Unbeknownst to him, the transmitter Jason had stashed on the alpha-beta combo was still attached to the outside of his beta. This made him the primary target.

As Robert got closer to the factory, a triumvirate of Invid Fighter Bioroids, the Masters' most elite troops, designed specifically to combat the threat of the Invid, sprang out of hiding. The three had obviously been stationed at the cannon to protect it. All three fired their weapons at him simultaneously.

Robert dodged two of the three blasts from the Invid Fighters. He took considerable damage from the third bioroid's laser blaster, but continued the fight, making it to the surface of the factory. He transformed his alpha into battloid mode and made a dash for the main cannon.

Wildcard took stock of the situation and it was grim: Two starships and eleven assault carriers converging on him at high speed. Two of the assault carriers took shots at him with their forward ion cannons!

Wildcard yelled curses at the approaching enemy ships as he dodged the blast from the leading assault carrier, but he wasn't able to dodge the shot from the second. He took a fair amount of damage to his mecha and was thrown into a spin. The shadow beta plummeted toward the surface of the factory, but Wildcard pulled out at the last minute. Once he realized where he was, he headed toward Robert at maximum speed to give him cover fire.

As he rocketed toward Robert, he spun his beta around backward and fired a huge volley of missiles at the pursuing vessels. An assault carrier tried to shoot down the missiles as

they streaked toward it, but missed. The carrier was devastated by the blast and turned to flee. Once near Robert, Wildcard yelled, "Robert, hurry up! The assault carriers and the transport ships may not fire their heavy guns since we are too close to the satellite, but let's not count on that!"

On the ground, the shuttle had relocated to a heavily wooded area to the south. Jeffries, the communications engineer, called up Drakinn and Matthews. He said, "We've detected a bogie entering the atmosphere above our position. It's descending at high speed. Looks like it will set down about ten miles from here, off to the west in the middle of the woods. One of you want to go check it out?"

Off in the distance, the unidentified ship descended like a shooting star which slowed as it approached the horizon and disappeared into the jungle. Matthews volunteered to go check it out. He transformed his tank into battloid mode and walked it cautiously into the jungle. Drakinn was now left alone with only his cyclone to guard the ship.

Reara, realizing that the Masters must have had inside knowledge of the team's plans, stopped her mecha, fell out of formation, and turned 180 degrees around.

"Nape, I think the Masters knew our plan. I'm going to try to get to the Aires, they might come under attack too!" she yelled.

Nape agreed. "You go, we'll do our best to keep these guys off your tail."

She headed for the Aires at maximum speed. It seemed that she was a mind reader. Only seconds later, a coded message

came in from the shuttle, "REF team, this is the Aires, an unidentified ship has landed in the jungle ten miles west of our position. Corporal Matthews has gone to investigate, leaving only Corporal Drakinn to guard the shuttle. Request backup ASAP."

Reara replied, "Copy that Aires I'm inbound." She then informed the rest of the team, "Nape, good luck bombing the mining post flat. When you're done, I could use your help at the shuttle. This pod is slower than the rest of the team so I'll take a head start. We've been had, boys and girls. The Masters are not here! The only logical reason for this is that the Masters know the plan and are going to throw the Sergeant and Wildcard a surprise party. Then they trash the shuttle and we are contained. Done for, and I told the Sergeant, but listen to a Zentraedi? Hell no! Now the galaxy will pay for this error with blood! There is a mind wiped spy on the team! I told you and you knew! Damn it!!"

Reara received a message as she approached the shuttle. "Reara, this is Mathews, I have found the unidentified ship and it is a Zentraedi reentry pod. They have just offloaded a small army consisting of an officer's battle pod, four tactical battle pods, two light artillery pods, two heavy artillery pods, two male power armors and a recon scout pod. They are headed for the shuttle. I'm engaging them now. I could use some assistance."

"Roger that, Matthews, I'm on my way!"

As the formation approached the mining facility, a ship lifted off from behind the mountains in the distance. It rose slowly, eclipsing the setting sun. It was one of the Masters' large Tirolian transport ships. The team was shocked to see the

starship. They were beginning to feel the trap coming together around them.

As soon as the ship cleared the top of the mountain chain it fired its main cannon at the team.

The team dispersed to try to get out of the way of the beam. Most of them made it. Jason flew down and behind the building at the mining facility. Stram flew wide to get away from the area. Nape and Gia went high. Alex and Xavier broke left with Alex in lead and Xavier trailing right on his tail. Unfortunately, the two chose the wrong direction.

The enemy ship's main cannon flashed to life and Xavier was caught in the beam. A muffled scream came over the radio just briefly as his damaged alpha, too slow to escape the beam, disintegrated around him.

In space, Robert pulled the switch that transformed his fighter into battloid mode. He told Wildcard, "Get close and cover me while I deposit our little present."

As the transformation sequence was completing, Robert's mecha was already reaching into the beta's bomb bay to take the nuke. He then fired three missiles at each of the bioroids guarding the main cannon and made a run for his target. One bioroid was hit and thrown into a bulkhead, but the other two were able to duck behind structures on the surface of the factory and avoid the missile attack. Robert then dove for the main cannon, firing wildly with his Destabilizer gun and spraying the area with where the Invid fighter bioroids were hiding in a desperate effort to keep their heads down.

When he reached the gaping hole which was the barrel of the factory's main proton cannon, there was someone waiting for

him. Inside the barrel was a Zentraedi officer's battlepod. Unlike the standard battlepod, it had arms, and a large particle beam cannon mounted at the top of its main body. It took him completely by surprise as it fired its particle beam cannon at point blank range!

Robert took the shot from the officer's battlepod right in the chest. The blast blew him nearly one hundred feet back, away from his objective. Sparks flew and the smell of smoke and fried circuits filled the cockpit. He coaxed the mecha back onto its feet and fired back with all his remaining missiles. The pod was reduced to chunks of red hot metal and ashes and Robert fired his mecha's thrusters and flew down into the barrel of the main cannon. "Wildcard, this is it! Get ready to link up. We are getting the heck out of here!"

Robert then activated the nuke and hurled it into the main cannon. As soon as the nuke left the alpha's hand he hit full thrusters and accelerated straight up to get away, transforming back into fighter mode as he ascended. The three Invid fighters got a parting shot at him with their laser blasters. Robert dodged two of the three shots, taking yet more damage to his already crippled mecha.

In space above Robert, Wildcard was shocked to see that one of the two huge transport ships had descended to just a few hundred feet above the surface of the factory and was launching bioroids on hover pads out a hatch on the bottom of the ship. His targeting computer was maxed out at 48 targets as the bioroids raced toward him. He could tell that there were more than 48, but that is all his radar could track at one time. The other transport ship began to disgorge Zentraedi battlepods. All together, there were more than a hundred bad guys racing toward him.

Wildcard, remarkably calm for this kind of situation, said, "That all you got?" as the fleet of enemies converged on him. He fired a volley of missiles at the oncoming bioroids and went into fighter mode streaking up into space along with Robert. The missiles hit home in on a red bioroid who tried unsuccessfully to dodge them. The missiles struck him in the chest, reducing him to a flaming meteorite that impacted on the surface of the factory. Wildcard then fired more missiles at an officers pod leading the Zentraedi advance, but it had better luck than the bioroid. The pod succeeded in shooting down all the missiles as they streaked toward it. That was the last of his missiles, he was totally empty.

The Invid fighters fired at Wildcard, missing him entirely, but two other onrushing bioroids hit him with their laser blasters. Wildcard's beta was thrown into a spin by the blast, but he was able to recover. He continued to move at high speed to avoid being an easy target, there were just too many enemies to avoid them all. Two assault carriers and a blue bioroid took shots at him as he sped to Roberts' side.

Wildcard dodged the shot from the first assault carrier, but was hit by the second one, taking massive damage. The smell of burnt plastic filled the cockpit and a warning light on the instrument console began flashing "STEALTH.... STEALTH.... STEALTH...." indicating that the shadow beta had lost its stealth capability. A bioroid swooped by, taking a shot with its weapons drum, but fortunately missed him entirely.

Robert then yelled, "Wildcard, link up, now!" He then flew a corkscrew maneuver to get close enough to Wildcard to join up.

Wildcard agreed, saying "Robert, these things just keep coming, let's get the hell out of here!" Then he made a frantic

call to the Perytonian Government on a coded frequency and informed them, "Corporal Wildcard Here, Tell The Fleet on Tirol to get ready to send as many available ships as possible, the factory's main cannon is about to blow, and we need backup! Lots of backup!"

Meanwhile, outside the Aires, Drakinn waited patiently for Matthews to return from his recon of the enemy ship which had landed about ten miles to the west, in the jungle.

Matthews had the advantage of surprise, although he was definitely outnumbered. He decided to take a shot at the officer's battlepod from his concealed position and scored a direct hit with his hovertank's main cannon. The officer's pod was completely destroyed by the gargantuan weapon.

At that moment, a strange noise came over the Zentraedi tactical communications net. Rera played her reed flute, and took turns speaking in Zentraedi, wishing to confuse them long enough to reach the area in time to help Matthews. The tactic worked. In fact, Matthews was able to take another shot with his main cannon during the confusion and a Zentraedi in male power armor was completely disintegrated by the blast.

Rera entered the scene just as the rest of the Zentraedi assault force began firing on Matthews. A dozen missiles from one of the light artillery pods hit the hovertank. The light artillery pod was more heavily armed than the standard tactical battle pod, with two short range missile launchers mounted to the top of its main fuselage. This pod had launched its entire load of missiles. The hovertank was totaled, but fortunately for Matthews, he was thrown from the open cockpit by the blast, taking heavy damage to his Southern Cross body armor, but surviving.

As she got closer, Reara started strafing the ground with her pod's particle beam cannons. Four tactical battlepods, and two light artillery pods were caught up in the rain of death and reduced to scrap metal.

The male power armor was not as maneuverable as the female version, but what it lacked in agility, it made up for with firepower. It began firing on Reara as she streaked by. One of the heavy artillery pods fired off its four medium range missiles at Reara as the pod streaked away above the jungle canopy. All four missiles found their target, causing the pod's thrusters to begin flickering on and off. The pod could no longer stay airborne, but it still had enough controllability to make a soft landing in the jungle just a short distance from the fight.

Matthews could be heard on the radio, calling to Reara, "Help! That last explosion knocked a huge tree down on me! I'm trapped!"

Drakinn also called up, "Reara, do you need my assistance? I'm reluctant to leave the shuttle unguarded, but I can be there in seconds if you need me."

Reara, over the radio, yelled back "Drakinn, get the shuttle the hell out of here!!!"

Drakinn calmly replied, "I'm sending the shuttle away. I'm gonna stick around and join the fight. Just hold out for another minute, I'm on my way!"

Then Reara turned the pod to face her enemies. As the pod ran to the fallen tree she fired one missile at each enemy, hitting all four, crippling the three pods and causing a fair amount of damage to the power armor. She then fired her cannons randomly in the direction of the enemy mecha, hoping to keep them under cover and avoid being shot as she helped Matthews.

To her surprise she actually hit a few of them with her barrage.

Reara pulled the tree off Matthews, she heard a voice speaking Zentraedi come over her radio, saying "This.... is for my commander...."

The Zentraedi in male power armor fired his shoulder mounted particle beam cannon at Matthews, hitting him in the chest and piercing the breast plate of his Southern Cross body armor. Matthews slumped over and fell face first to the ground. Then in Zentraedi, Reara heard, "and this.... is a gift for the traitor!"

Then the male power armor fired the same weapon at Reara!

Reara quickly rolled out of the way, and speaking in Zentraedi, she said "You honorless bastard! The warrior was helpless! You are not fit to call yourself a Zentraedi warrior!!! But you shall soon join your commander!"

Back at the mining facility, Stram flew directly at the gigantic starship, firing six missiles and pulling up once he was sure that his missiles would strike the ship in the main cannon. The missiles impacted on the ship's bow, but after the smoke cleared, the damage didn't look very bad. The cannon might still be capable of firing.

On the ground, Jason transformed his fighter into battloid mode and entered the main building at the mining facility. He saw that the entire building had been stripped of every useful item. Apparently, the Masters expected to lose the building in this fight and pulled everything they could out of it.

A hatch near the bottom of the starship opened, and out flew ten bioroids on hover pads. There was one red, the rest were blue and green. The red took a shot at Stram with his laser

blaster.

Stram began evasive maneuvers and rolled out of the way of the red bioroid's shot. Then he converted to guardian mode and fired back with his gun pod, hitting the red in the shoulder and causing minor damage.

Nape also swung around and attacked the red bioroid, aiming at the reinforced pilot's compartment in the center of its chest. The bioroid took the shot to its chest without dodging and fired back at Nape, hitting him with a powerful blast from the hover sled's dual ion cannons!

Nape's mecha was nearly destroyed by the blast. The cockpit filled with thick black smoke and he lost all visual references of the outside world. He tried unsuccessfully to jettison the canopy. Thinking quickly, he pulled out his sidearm and fired a large hole in the canopy to vent the smoke. The glass shattered and the smoke cleared.

Gia, finally seeing her chance to prove her worth to her new friends, flew her battloid into the fray and fired at the bioroid that shot Nape, totally destroying it.

Nape called out, "All units here at the mining site, stay close to that ship so it can't bring the main gun to bear on us!"

As if it had been reading Nape's mind, the main cannon began to glow ominously and the bioroids began to disperse!

In the air over the mine, Alex and Gia were caught out in the open as the main cannon discharged its deadly energy. They both attempted to dodge, but Alex was still stunned by the loss of his long time friend and his mind just wasn't in the game. With his reaction time just a little slow, Alex was caught in the beam and he and his alpha disappeared without a trace.

The group absolutely could not flee. To do so would be to give the starship a free shot at them with its main cannon.

Stram yelled, “This is madness! We’ve got to do something about that cannon or we’re all dead!” He converted to fighter mode and flew closer to the main gun of the ship and fired every last missile that he had left. At point blank range, there wasn't much chance of missing, and the remainder of his missiles struck the ship right in the main gun. The huge explosion left a gaping hole in the front of the ship. All the remaining bioroids fled back to their mother ship and it began to fly straight up into the sky in an attempt to flee from the battle.

The team had won the battle, the mine was theirs, but at the cost of two members of their group.

With the remaining members of his team now out of danger, Nape commented, “My God! If this is what they sent against our diversion, I can’t imagine what Robert and Wildcard are up against! I hope they fare better than we did.”

*My dearest Marlene,*

*I've got some great news! My request for transfer was finally approved! We'll finally be able to spend some serious time together. I'll link up with your Horizon-t as soon as the Duke returns to Tirol. I can't believe we're actually going to be serving on the same ship.*

*I have to admit, my time here on the Duke has been exciting. I'll probably be one of only a few hundred guys in the whole Mars Division to have any real combat experience. The majority of those guys probably haven't fired a shot outside of a training scenario the whole time they've been here.*

*Anyway, the transfer isn't all I'm excited about. I've got something really important to talk to you about, but that will have to wait till I see you in person.*

*Love,*

*Scott*

## **Chapter 13**

**"Rob... I suggest we run! I'm three sparks away from blowing up! The Nuke is in the hole, and it should go off soon, so let's get the hell out..."**

The main cannon on the nearest starship went off and Robert deftly moved the fighter out of the way just in time. A

second shot came from the other starship, and Robert moved to avoid it but only barely made it. The shot missed by such a small margin that all the paint was baked off the upper side of the alpha-beta combo leaving a shiny silver finish and temporarily blinding the two pilots!

Fortunately for the team, the firing of the two main cannons had left a window of opportunity. All the Masters' and Zentraedi mecha had moved away to avoid being hit by the big guns, leaving a corridor with no enemies and a clear path away from the factory. Their eyes quickly readjusted to the darkness and they resumed the fight.

Robert tried to fire the alpha's Destabilizer at the nearest starship, but there was a malfunction and the weapon remained silent! A small red light on his instrument console flashed "Weapons Systems" at him. Robert prayed, "Please God get us out of here!" as he went through the emergency procedures that were drilled into him during pilot training. He managed to get the weapons back on line quickly.

As Wildcard pushed the throttle to full power, he yelled "Hang on, woo hoo!" and the alpha-beta combo escaped through the opening in the enemy lines. As they were speeding away from the factory, there was a blinding flash from behind them and all the electronics on the two fighters went out, leaving the heroic pair tumbling through space in total darkness. As the linked fighters rolled end over end in space, Wildcard and Robert got a glimpse of the factory behind them. Where the main cannon had been, there was now a large crater. Near the crater was a starship, adrift, tumbling in space and burning out of control.

As Robert began emergency restart procedures, he called, "Wildcard, are you OK back there?"

Wildcard responded, "Robert, I'm ok. If you can get the radio back online, I'm going to call the Perytonian Government and have them relay the 'go ahead' to the fleet."

"Good call, get on it!"

Robert finished running his restart procedures, and the lights on the control panel flashed back to life. The radio started crackling, and the engines roared. Wildcard sent his message, and a few minutes later a response was received.

The Perytonians replied, "We have relayed your situation to the REF fleet. They are already en route. Stand by for de-fold operations."

From the surface of the planet another of the Tirolian starships rose, moving toward the factory. It seemed to have taken serious damage to the main cannon in a recent battle on the surface. The one undamaged Tirolian ship began to move in on Robert and Wildcard's position, moving to intercept them before they could make it back to the planet. The ship was incredibly fast, and looked as if it would catch them.

Just then, the sky filled with brilliant points of light a thousand times brighter than the stars as six Ikazuchi command carriers materialized out of space fold, dragging a dozen Garfish troop transports in their wake. The Tirolian ship foolishly fired on the REF fleet, hitting one of the Garfish square in the nose, splitting it in half and sending it spinning into the planet's atmosphere.

Three Ikazuchis simultaneously delivered a counterstrike with their ant-ship cannons, hitting the Tirolian ship in the side. The Tirolian ship began to spew fire from the gaping holes in its side, but it got off another shot with its main cannon, hitting one of the Ikazuchis in the bow, causing massive damage and disabling its weapons systems. Two more Ikazuchis and six

Garfish fired on the enemy vessel, reducing it to a fireball of scrap metal drifting dead in space.

The REF fleet contacted Robert and Wildcard. "This is Captain Esteban of the Ikazuchi Command Carrier UES Iron Duke. Thanks guys, we'll take it from here. We're sending a Garfish to pick up the rest of your team. You will fly escort for them if you are up to it."

Robert agreed to fly escort for the Garfish and he and Wildcard rendezvoused with it as it descended toward the surface of the planet. Behind them, the Ikazuchis and Garfish disgorged hundreds of alpha and beta fighters. The fighters streaked toward the factory and the enemy ships, led by a blue and white alpha and his wingman. The defending bioroids and Zentraedi battlepods rushed to meet them.

The blackness of space was transformed into a deadly lightshow as the two sides opened fire at each other. The blue alpha circled, engaging targets of opportunity as they presented themselves. Then he saw what he was looking for. A red bioroid on a hover pad was wreaking havoc on the REF fighters. The bioroid swooped in and out of the battle, destroying the attacking fighters with ease.

The pilot of the blue alpha called to his wingman, "Halo 42, this is 41. Check out the red at 9 o'clock low."

"Roger, Scott. That guy definitely needs to be put in his place," came the wingman's reply.

"I'm in!"

"I'm with you!"

The two streaked for the red bioroid with guns blazing. The bioroid dodged them with ease and fired back. The wingman was hit, and lost a huge portion of his wing and one of his two engines.

“Scott, I’m down to 50% power. I’m out!”

“OK, get clear! I can take him!”

The blue alpha broke hard left and took another run at the red bioroid. This time his shot found its mark, but it wasn’t enough to disable his opponent. As the alpha sped past, the bioroid took careful aim, leading his target with his weapon and firing.

Just as the bioroid pulled the trigger, the alpha transformed into Guardian mode and fired its leg thrusters, bringing it to a dead stop just in time to avoid the bioroids shot. Scott’s chin pressed hard into his chest as the alpha rapidly decelerated.

“Finish him, Scott!” came his wingman’s frantic call.

Scott now dove his alpha straight at his foe, loosing his entire load of missiles as he accelerated. They struck their target and the bioroid exploded into a huge fireball and the guardian mode alpha flew through it and emerged on the far side, scorched, but undamaged.

“Next!” Scott called as he searched for another target.

In the Great Forest, Rears turned and fired her cannons back at the Zentraedi in power armor who had killed Matthews, but he dodged just as deftly as she had. Then she fired at the artillery pod, which also dodged. Responding in Zentraedi, the pilot of the power armor said, "As if one who would kill her own people can claim to have honor! I'll show you what honor is!"

With that, he fired his particle beam cannon at Rears again. And at the same time, the artillery pod let loose a volley of four missiles.

She took a particle beam blast right in the chest of her pod and at the same moment he was struck by the incoming missiles.

Her mecha was knocked to the ground and she struggled to right herself. She wasn't out of the fight just yet. She fired three missiles each at the power armor and the artillery pod and yelled over the radio, "Battle is the Zentraedi fulfillment! Your warriors died in battle! I am no traitor! I was raised on the micronian home world! Your cause is lost fool!"

As Reara stood her pod back up, she noticed that the controls were sluggish, and none of the sensors were functioning. It looked as if she might be about to eat the words she had just finished lashing the Zentraedi with.

A message came in over the radio. "REF ground forces, this is Captain Esteban of the Ikazuchi Command Carrier UES Iron Duke. We have engaged the Masters. There is a Garfish Transport en route to your location. Prepare for pickup."

The shuttle responded, "Iron Duke, this is the Horizon-t shuttle UES Aires. REF units are engaged with Zentraedi forces just to the west of our position. Please send assistance ASAP."

"Acknowledged Aires, mecha inbound. Will six betas and a MAC III be enough?"

"Yeah, that will do nicely."

Reara saw both particle beam cannons on the artillery pod swing in her direction and she prepared for the worst, but just as she thought it was about to fire at her, it took a volley of mini missiles to the chest, completely destroying it and killing the pilot. It was Drakinn in his cyclone armor!

The pilot of the power armor yelled, "Scout pod, get back to the ship, I'll hold them here!" Then he fired his shoulder mounted cannon at Drakinn, who dodged it with ease.

The scout pod replied, "Sir, Enemy units inbound at high speed approaching from the south!" The recon scout pod was completely unarmed. It was bristling with antennas but had no

weapons. Recognizing the perilous position it was in, it began to fall back to the reentry pod.

Reara responded to the command carrier, "Iron Duke this Private Reara, REF recreation center security officer. Units under Corporal Nape are also engaged with the enemy in the mountains to the west, please dispatch support to them as well!"

"We're already aware of the situation," came the reply.

With the Masters transport ship defeated, Jason asked the rest of the unit what was next. He received an update from the Iron Duke, "Iron Duke here, two of your team mates are up here with us, they will be coming down with a Garfish. They took heavy damage, but they are alive. Two more of your team are currently engaging Zentraedi ground forces to the east of your position about 100 km. We have dispatched mecha to assist."

Stram asked, "Our munitions are low, we need to rearm."

The Iron Duke replied, "Meet up with the Garfish, they will rearm your mecha and bring you up here. If there is anything left of the Masters when you get here, you can have at them."

The team met up at the rendezvous point and the Garfish arrived shortly after. The mecha bays opened and a message came in, "Enter landing bay one, there is a team standing by to take care of your mecha."

Once inside the ship, a crew chief met each team member. The chiefs said to get out of the cockpit and have a break, it would be about a half hour till they could launch again.

A lieutenant also met the team as they got out of their mecha, saying "You certainly have gone above and beyond the call of duty on this one. If you want to go to the chow hall, the food is hot and fresh. We're going to pick up the rest of your team before we head back up to the fight. You guys look tired,

how long has it been since you got a good night's sleep?"

The team decided unanimously on hot food and rest. In the chow hall, they dined on a meal the likes of which they had not seen in nearly a week.

Gia was with them, and needless to say, she drew some strange looks. Two security guards in CVR-3 armor, carrying gallant H-90 pistols, had been assigned to follow her, and they stood over her as she sat with the team, eating the human food tentatively at first, but eventually scarfing it down as her hunger took over.

The meal finished, the team decided to get some rest, but the security guards would not let Gia go with the rest of the team. One of the pair of armored men said, "I'm afraid the Invid has an appointment that she absolutely cannot miss. She will be coming with us."

"We'll see about that," said Nape.

*“One possible reason for the failure of the Mars Division to prosecute a successful assault against the Invid on Earth was the loss of the six capitol ships that were held back to deal with the Robotech Masters factory satellite. Not even a single Mars Division ship would reach its objective. That the operation would have been a success if those six ships had accompanied the rest of the fleet is, of course, only speculation. The firepower that those six ships could have provided was sorely missed.”*

*History of the Third Robotech War, Vol. IV*

## **Chapter 14**

**Still fighting in the jungle, Reara fired her cannons at the power armor as she ran for cover in the trees. As she did, she yelled "Drakinn leave the reentry pod! Let's get this toad! He killed Mathews!"**

Then, a beta fighter sporting a blue paint job entered the battle. It was en route to help finish off the power armor, but Reara said "Incoming beta there is a reentry pod in the area! This will be your primary target, be advised heavy resistance in the combat zone."

Her aim was true, and the power armor was obliterated by the powerful blast from her cannons. Drakinn fired the rest of his missiles at the artillery pod, which fired at the incoming projectiles hitting only one of them. Five mini missiles struck

the pod, destroying it. The scout pod, its defenders gone, separated at the waist, the legs falling to the jungle floor as the pod section rocketed skyward in an attempt to flee.

At the same time, the saucer like reentry pod lifted off. It rose from the jungle, slowly at first, but gaining speed quickly.

The inbound beta reported, "Reentry pod fleeing, we're firing reflex multi-warhead missiles."

Missiles from all six beta fighters streaked into the sky chasing the reentry pod, some hit, but several missed. The damage was not enough to bring it down. The reflex missiles, highly maneuverable, turned and came around for another attack. These missiles were capable of making multiple runs at a target. They hit their mark on the second pass. The powerful missiles exploded as they impacted the ship, crippling it. It began to fall out of the sky, and exploded as it crashed into the jungle below.

The lead beta pilot informed Reara and Drakinn of his results, "Got her! We're gonna link up with a flight of alpha and fly CAP. We'll make sure you don't get any more unwanted surprises."

Reara and Drakinn were shocked when three trees were simultaneously pushed to the ground just yards from them. They turned and took aim at the gigantic mecha that was walking toward them and knocking over anything that stood in its way. To their relief, it was an REF Mac III Monster.

The MAC pilot asked, "Can I be of any assistance?"

"Just in time! I don't know what we would have done without you!" Reara replied sarcastically.

The Garfish continued slowly on course about a thousand feet above the rolling terrain. The ship resembled a twentieth

century blimp, much larger. Beneath its main fuselage was a docking bay for mecha and a three barreled anti ship turret. The way its anti gravity engines allowed it to float through the sky only reinforced the blimp image. The great jungle passed beneath and columns of smoke rose out of the trees in the distance. The ship came to a stop over the burning remains of mecha. Mostly Zentraedi, the burning hulks also included Matthews' mangled hovertank. Walking among the ruined war machines was Reara's REF assault pod and the MAC III monster. Reara's mecha was carrying a body clad in Southern Cross body armor. Drakinn could also be seen on the jungle floor, standing in his cyclone armor, CADS still extended.

The Robotech factory quickly came under fire from the remains of the REF fleet. Three of the Ikazuchis fired their anti ship cannons. The masters quickly came to the conclusion that they could not win this battle, and decided to act on their only other option.

Shran yelled, "Make preparations for fold operations to commence as soon as possible! Without our cannon, we are no match for them!"

The deck shook and the lights flickered as the factory was rocked by yet another hit from the Ikazuchis. Anti ship missiles impacted on the factory's external armor plating. Garfish fired their tri barreled turrets and REF mecha of all description crushed the Masters' defenders.

"Move our remaining ships between us and the human fleet. Launch anti-ship missiles at all human ships within range!" commanded Baz.

"Yes, my Lords! What shall our fold destination be?" asked the clone masters.

"The last place in the universe they would expect."

The defense systems of the satellite retaliated in the only way left to them, scores of anti-ship missiles flocked toward the Ikazuchi and Garfish class starships. Pinpoint barrier systems sprang to life. The tiny shields, looking like points of light, darted across the surface of the large Ikazuchi Command Carriers, stopping as many of the missiles as they could. The lead ship succumbed to the attack as it took too much damage and its reactor exploded in a brilliant ball of light and fire. Two of the Garfish, too small to have a pinpoint barrier system, were utterly destroyed. The missiles took a terrible toll on the rest of the fleet.

Space filled with a blinding light as the fold engines of the factory warped the very fabric of space. Then, as quickly as it began, it was over. Space returned to its usual blackness and the factory was nowhere to be found.

Captain Esteban, disappointed at the loss of the factory, called the Garfish retrieving the remains of the ground team. He informed them of the factory's escape and ordered it to rendezvous with the rest of the fleet as soon as practical.

The team was re-united aboard the Garfish, and although many good friends were lost along the way, a world was saved and the plans of the Masters were at least temporarily thwarted. The names of the intrepid team of REF warriors were all over the news back on Tirol. When they got back, they were celebrities. But they would still have to deal with one ominous fact. The Masters got away. Although the main cannon was destroyed, and the rest of the factory had been heavily damaged by the REF fleet, the factory satellite could still produce ships,

and no doubt the Masters would set to repairing their factory and constructing a fleet capable of re-taking their home world back from the REF.

For the time being, the team forgot about the lost factory. They were filled with relief at surviving the ordeal on Peryton and saddened by the loss of their friends.

In the great hall on Tirol, the Plenipotentiary Council convened a special meeting. Both Admirals Rick and Lisa Hunter were present, along with Dr. Lang, the man most responsible for the REF's Robotech ships and mecha. The hall was filled to capacity with hundreds of officers and men who had shown up to see the proceedings.

Rick Hunter addressed the crowd, "Today we honor the heroes who saved an entire world and prevented the Robotech Masters from taking us by surprise. If not for their efforts we would now be fighting a war on two fronts, one against the Masters here in the Omicron sector, and one against the Invid back on Earth. On this day, we send a vast armada to retake our home world. I hope the actions of these brave Robotech warriors will be an inspiration to all of you as you fight to liberate the Earth."

Lisa walked from her seat to Rick's side. She was carrying a tray with medals and badges of rank. A lieutenant read off the names of team and they came forward to receive their awards.

The entire crowd stood at attention as a lieutenant read the citation. The team stood shoulder to shoulder as Rick and Lisa walked down the row and pinned the Titanium Medal of Valor to their chests.

Once they had all received their medals, the lieutenant read another announcement. The announcement stated that Robert was promoted to the rank of commander; Nape was promoted to

lieutenant commander. Reara, Stram, Drakinn, Jason and Wildcard were all promoted to third lieutenant.

The assembled crowd erupted in applause. In the front row, tears of joy filling her eyes, Gia clapped for her new friends. Her future was uncertain, but her friends had been able to influence the admirals not to turn her over to REF intelligence just yet. Dr. Lang had an interest in her as well. Robert had decided that as long as he could help it, no harm would come to her.

Rick Hunter then went on to announce that Robert would be put in command of the task force charged with locating and either capturing or destroying the Robotech Masters' Factory Satellite. At his disposal would be all the ships that had survived the initial assault on the factory at Peryton. This included five Ikazuchi command carriers and nine Garfish class Troop Transport ships. In addition, Robert was to command one of the extremely capable Izumo class battleships, the UES Repulse.

The team was overjoyed by the decorations and promotions. And to have an entire task force at their disposal was more than they had dared hope for. They were all ecstatic, except for Robert. His eyes almost never left Gia. She was accompanied by two armed guards that were always at her side on the rare occasions she was allowed out of the detention area.

A few hours after the awards ceremony, the team received orders to report to Admiral Hunter's office. They all returned to the pyramidal Royal Hall in the center of the city. A lieutenant sitting at a desk outside of Rick's office told them they should go in immediately, so they entered, saluted and stood at attention in front of Rick's desk.

Rick returned their salute and said, "First, let me once more congratulate you all on a job well done. Your decorations and promotions are all well deserved. However, I called you here to address some serious concerns about the security of our future operations.

"I have read your reports. Your attack on the space factory turned out to be an ambush. Two excellent pilots were lost in the attack on the mine, and Matthews was killed during the Zentraedi attack on the shuttle. The enemy seems to have known your every move before you made it."

"Some of you have indicated in your reports that you believe there must have been a spy in your group and I would agree with that assessment. Before you are allowed to take your new assignments, we must determine who the spy was."

Reara was first to respond, "Finally, someone believes me about the spy! If someone had just listened to me back on Peryton, maybe Matthews, Alex and Xavier would be here with us today!"

"Calm down lieutenant," said Rick, "Finding a spy is no easy task. Especially when the Masters are concerned. Intelligence indicates that they are experts in subconscious manipulation. The spy may not even be aware of his actions. We will leave the task of uncovering his or her identity to the experts."

"For the time being, all of your security clearances are temporarily revoked. You may move about the base and the city freely, but you will not be allowed into any restricted areas. Also, you may not operate mecha until this matter has been resolved. Any questions?"

Robert asked, "That seems reasonable, but what about Gia?"

Rick answered, "She will be kept under guard, and no doubt questioned by intel. After that, I'm not quite sure."

Drakinn asked, "Are there any plans to return her to her people?"

"We are addressing the issue. Several parties have expressed their interest in her as an intelligence source." Rick explained, "I'm sure you can recognize her value as such, especially on the eve of the battle to retake the Earth."

Robert exclaimed, with uncharacteristic intensity, "An intelligence source? No sir, that's not how we see her! We see her as a friend!" Then he glanced over at Reara and added, "Or at the very least a comrade in arms?"

To that, Reara nodded.

"She's one of our team, sir," agreed Nape.

"I see. You all have pretty strong feelings about this Invid." Rick said. "I'll see what I can do for her. Don't forget, however, that she is one of them. An Invid."

"Sir, I know we aren't allowed in any restricted areas, but can we at least go visit her in the detention center?" asked Robert.

"Of course you can, commander," answered Rick. "Now, there is one more issue to address. There will be an investigation into the friendly fire incident involving Private Brian Stuart. I will be taking a very special interest in this investigation. I expect all of you to cooperate fully. Now, if you have no further questions, you are dismissed."

Robert and the others saluted smartly and left the room. Outside, Robert asked if anyone wanted to go with him to visit Gia. The rest of the group had to decline. They all had appointments to interview applicants who wanted to join the recently promoted officers' new squadrons.

Robert said, "I'll head on over there now, you guys go see her when you get the chance."

Reara, with a quizzical look, said, "You seem strangely preoccupied with her lately. There something you want to tell us?"

"No! It's just... Well, I feel a little responsible for the predicament she's in. That's all," said Robert

"Yeah, I guess we all are," said Jason. "But don't you forget, thanks to us, she is still alive. If she had been back in the hive with the rest of her people, she'd have been vaporized, right? So don't be too hard on yourself."

Robert agreed. He smiled, partly to let them know that he was going to be fine, but mostly because he was relieved that they had not discovered his true feelings for Gia.

As Robert walked toward the detention center where Gia was being held, he wrestled with the feelings that were quickly becoming more and more obvious. The fact that he had tried to hide them from his friends made it impossible for him to deny.

Am I falling in love? He thought to himself. This just can't be! This girl used to be a blue-green slug flopping around in nutrient fluid!

The encounter at the lake played itself out in his mind as he walked. He wrestled with undeniable emotions.

Robert's internal debate ended abruptly when he entered the detention area and saw Gia behind the cold steel bars of her cell.

As he approached the cell, he asked her how she was doing and how she had been treated.

When he got close enough, Gia hugged him through the bars of the cell and said, "Robert, I'm so glad you are here."

Robert reached through the bars and returned her hug.

*Well, that settles it, Robert thought, I guess I really am in love with an Invid.*

Several months passed, and everyone was interviewed and questioned about the events of the Perytonian campaign. The issue of Brian's death and the possibility that one of them could be a spy caused them to have to stay on Tirol instead of being out chasing down the Masters. Reports came in of REF ships engaging ships of Robotech Master design all around the Omicron sector. Fortunately, numbers were always on the REF side and the engagements often ended with the destruction of an enemy ship or two.

They were all sick and tired of answering questions when the day finally came. The report was inconclusive. No significant evidence could be found to implicate any one of them as a spy, and neither was anyone implicated in the death of Brian Stuart. Robert was finally given his ship. Nape was his second in command, and the rest of the team each got command of a fighter squadron of their own. Their mission was to hunt down the Masters and prevent them from constructing their fleet and re-taking Tirol. Robert knew that this mission would be of critical importance, and although he was honored that they had chosen him to command it, he had other things on his mind.

Robert and Nape walked the corridors of their ship, the Repulse. It was huge and seemed to go on for miles. They stopped in to see how things were going with Reara at her new squadron. When the door opened, they saw her yelling at some poor sergeant about some scenario he had just finished in the simulators. It was easy to see that she was in heaven.

They both continued down the long metallic corridor. They soon entered a massive hangar bay where a Horizon-v shuttle,

the sleeker and faster version of the Horizon class shuttle was prepped and ready for launch.

“Going somewhere?” asked Nape.

Robert answered, “Yeah, I’m going down to the city. I’m going to visit Gia one last time before we leave orbit.”

“Well, tell her I said ‘Hi,’ and hurry back,” said Nape as Robert boarded the shuttle, nodding and waiving goodbye.

As the shuttle descended toward the planet, the scene had changed much from when they had arrived several months ago. Most of the ships were gone. The Mars Division had departed for Earth, leaving Robert’s 14 ship task force behind. On the far side of Tirol the Jupiter division was just starting to assemble.

Back in the capitol, Robert made his way down the considerably less crowded streets to the Royal Hall and into the detention center. He was still somewhat of a celebrity, and people who recognized him would sometimes ask him questions about his adventure. Others would talk amongst themselves as he passed, but it was obvious by the quick glances in his direction that he was the topic of discussion.

Robert spent most of his time these days in the detention center talking with Gia. A couple of times he had even talked the guard into letting them take a walk together, supervised of course. Today, with his impending departure so close at hand, it was easy to talk the guard into letting them out for a while. While they walked, she recounted her interrogation sessions and the long hours she had spent in Dr. Lang’s laboratory. The stories were painful to hear. Tales of her being hooked up to strange machines of which he could only guess the function. When their walk was finished, she was locked back into her cell. As the barred door slammed shut, he looked into Gia’s beautiful burgundy eyes. He saw despair, dread and fear in her. He knew

she was thinking about what the next day's interrogation session might bring. Pleading with Admiral Hunter had gotten him nowhere. Dr. Lang was too fascinated by the research opportunities that she represented to even think about helping Robert. With all his reasonable options seemingly exhausted, he now felt that he had only one course of action left to him. He knew what he had to do, but could he bring himself to do it.

## About the Author

Brian McAfee is currently on active duty with the United States Air Force. He serves as a crewmember aboard the HC-130P, combat rescue variant of the venerable C-130 Hercules. He has flown on dozens of combat missions over Afghanistan in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. During his time with combat rescue, he has been credited with approximately 20 lives saved and another six assists. He is married and has one daughter. They currently reside in the southwestern United States. Brian's robotech.com user name is Seifrietti Weisse.

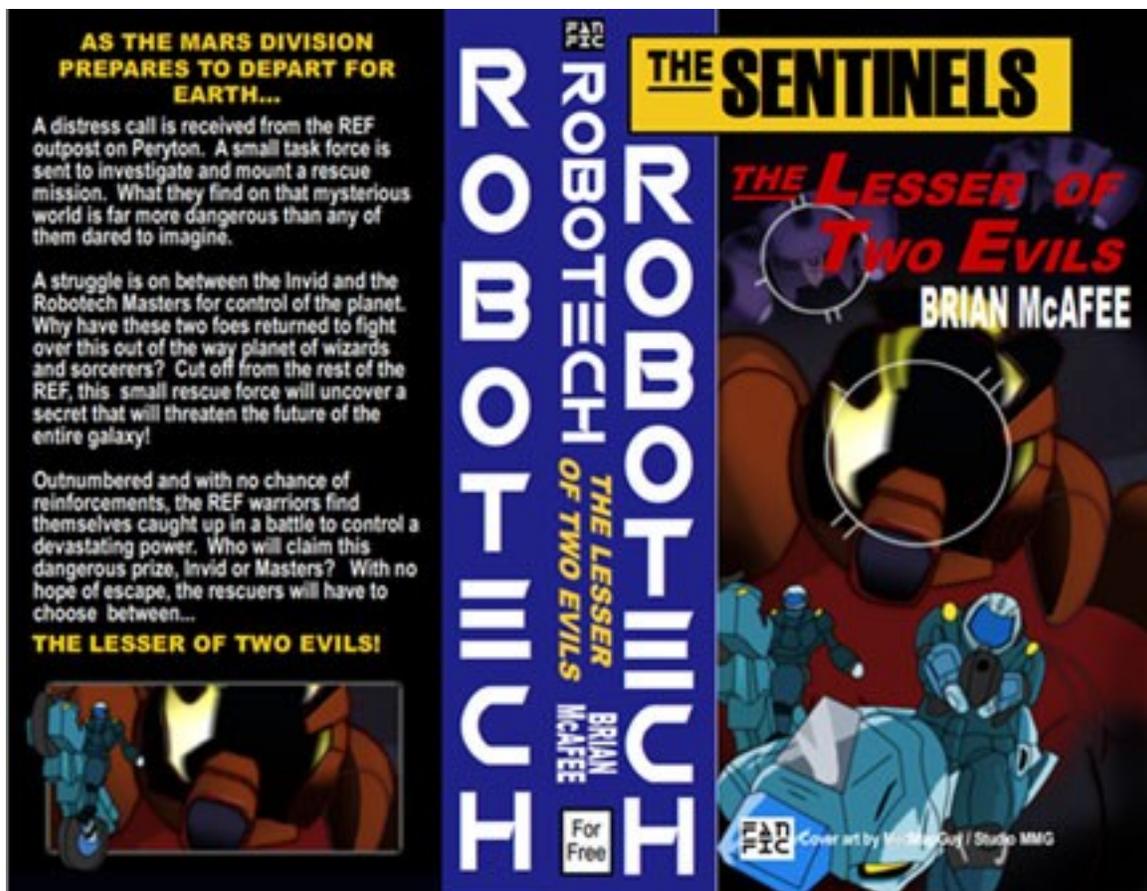
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