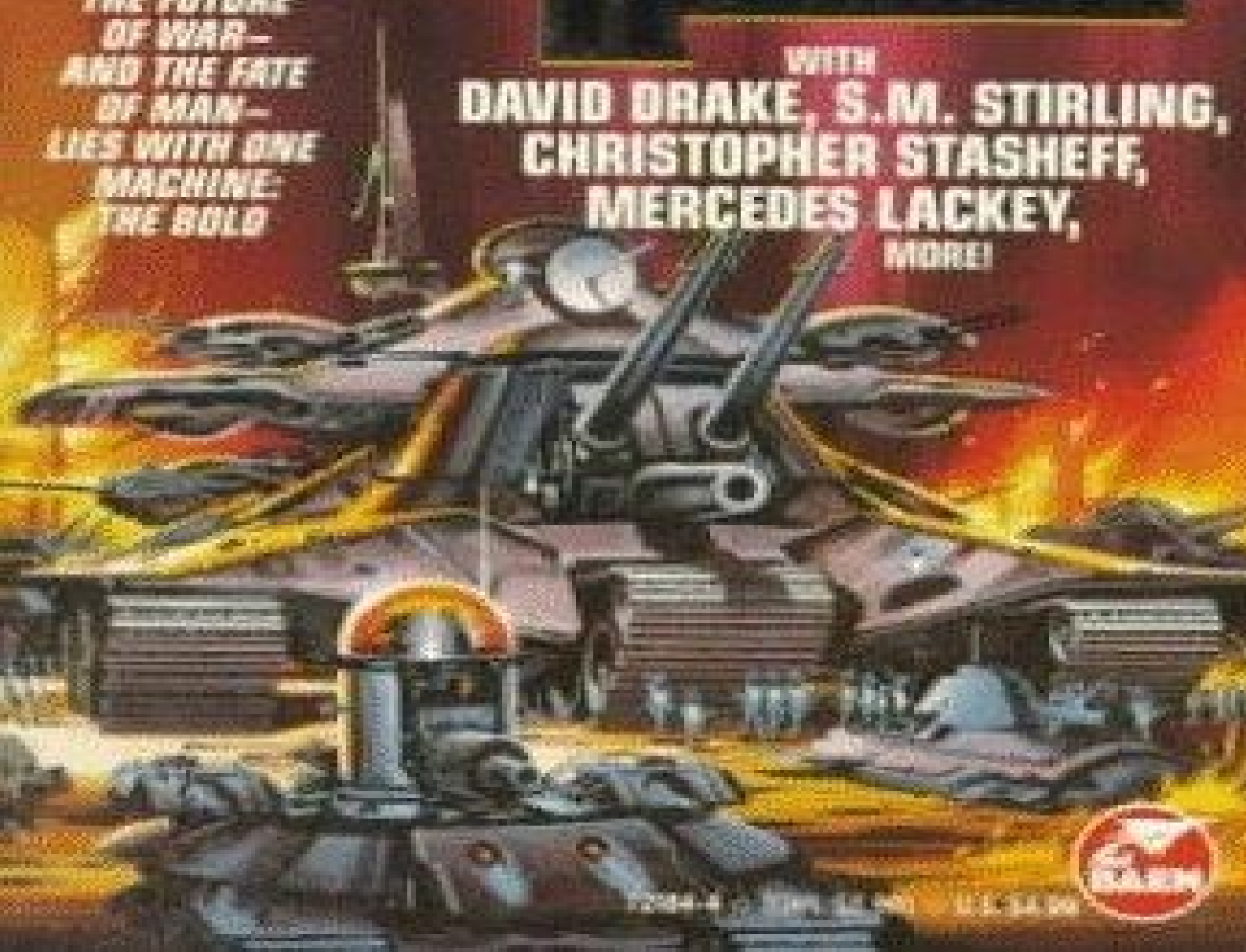


CREATED BY
KEITH LAUMER

WALLS

THE FUTURE OF WAR—AND THE FATE OF MAN—LIES WITH ONE MACHINE: THE BOLD

WITH
**DAVID DRAKE, S.M. STIRLING,
CHRISTOPHER STASHEFF,
MERCEDES LACKEY,
AND MORE!**



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BOLOS:

HONOR OF THE REGIMENT

CREATED BY KEITH LAUMER

EDITED BY BILL FAWCETT

FOR THE HONOR OF THE REGIMENT

My forty-seven pairs of flint-steel roadwheels are in depot condition. Their tires of spun beryllium monocrystal, woven to deform rather than compress, all have 97% or better of their fabric unbroke. The immediate terrain is semi-arid. The briefing files inform me this is typical of the planet. My track links purr among themselves as they grind through scrub vegetation and the friable soil, carrying me to my assigned mission.

There is a cataclysmic fuel-air explosion to the east behind me. The glare is visible for 5.3 seconds and the ground will shake for many minutes as shock waves echo through the planetary mantle.

Had my human superiors so chosen, I could be replacing Saratoga at the spearhead of the attack.

The rear elements of the infantry are in sight now. They look like dung beetles in their hard suits, crawling backward beneath a rain of shrapnel. I am within range of their low-power communication net. "Hold what you got, troops," orders the unit's acting commander. "Big Brother's come to help!"

I am not Big Brother. I am Maldon, a Mark XXX Bolo of the 3rd Battalion, Dinochrome Brigade. The lineage of our unit goes back to the 2nd South Wessex Dragoons. In 1944, we broke the last German resistance on the path to Falaise-though we traded our flimsy Cromwells against the Tigers at a ration of six to one to do it.

The citizens do not need to know what the cost is. They need only to know that the mission has been accomplished. The battle honors welded to my turret prove that I have always accomplished my mission.

LOST LEGION

S.M. Stirling

“Shit,” Captain McNaught said.

The map room of Firebase Villa had been dug into the soft friable rock with explosives, the top topped with sheet steel and sandbags. It smelled of sweat and bad coffee and electronic components, and the sandbags in the dog-leg entrance were still ripped where a satchel charge—a stick grenade in a three-pound ball of plastique—had been thrown during the attack six months ago.

“Captain?” the communications specialist said.

“Joy, wonder, unconfined happiness, shit,” the officer snarled, reading the printout again.

“Martins, get in here!”

Lieutenant Martins ducked through the entrance of the bunker and flipped up the faceplate of his helmet. The electronics in the crystal sandwich would have made the bunker as bright as the tropical day outside, but also would have turned her face to a nonreflective curve. Human communication depends on more than words alone to carry information, as anyone who meets face-to-face for the first time after telephone conversations learns. “News?” she said.

“Look.” He handed over the paper.

“Aw, shit.”

“My commandante, is this the right time for the raid?”

Miguel Chavez turned and fired a long burst. The muzzle blast of the AK-74 was deafening in the confined space of the cave. The other guerilla’s body pitched backwards and slammed into the coarse limestone wall, blood trailing down past fossilized seashells a hundred and twenty million years old. Pink intestine bulged through the torn fatigues, and the fecal odor was overwhelming.

None of the other guerilla commanders moved, but sweat glistened on their high-cheeked faces. Outside the sounds of the jungle night—and the camp—were stilled for an instant. Sound gradually returned to normal. Two riflemen ducked inside the low cave and dragged the body away by the ankles.

“The Glorious Way shall be victorious!” Chavez said. “We shall conquer!”

The others responded with a shout and a clenched-fist salute.

“I know,” Chavez went on, “that some of our comrades are weary. They say: The colossus of the North is reeling. The gringo troops are withdrawing. Why not hide and wait? Let the enemy’s internal contradictions win for us. We have fought many years, against the compradore puppet regime and the imperialist intervention force.”

“Comrades,” he went on, “this is defeatism. When the enemy retreats, we advance. The popular masses must see that the enemy are withdrawing in defeat. They must see that the People’s Army of the Glorious Way has chased the gringos from the soil of San Gabriel. Then they will desert the puppet regime, which has attempted to regroup behind the shelter of the imperialist army.”

“Our first objective,” he went on, “is to interdict the resupply convoy from the coast. We will attack at—” “Yeah, it’s nothing but indigs,” Martins said, keeping her voice carefully neutral. “The indigs, and you and me. That’s a major part of the problem.”

Will you look at that mother, she thought.

The new tank was huge. Just standing beside it made her want to step back; it wasn’t right for a self-propelled object to be this big.

The Mark III was essentially a four-sided pyramid with the top lopped off, but the simple outline was bent and smoothed where the armor was sloped for maximum deflection; and jagged where sensor-arrays and weapons jutted from the brutal massiveness of the machine. Beneath were two sets of double tracks, each nearly six feet broad, each supported on eight interleaved road wheels. Between them they underlay nearly half the surface of the vehicle. She laid a hand on the flank, and the quivering, slightly greasy feel of live machinery came through her fingerless glove, vibrating up her palm to the elbow.

“So we don’t have much in the way of logistics,” she went on. Try fucking none. Just her and the Captain and eighty effectives, and occasionally they got spare parts and ammo through from what was supposed to be headquarters down here on the coast. “Believe me, up in the boonies mules are high tech these days. We’re running our UATVs”-Utility All Terrain Vehicles-“on kerosene from lamps cut with the local slash, when someone doesn’t drink it before we get it.” The tank commander’s name was Vinatelli; despite that he was pale and blond and a little plump, his scalp almost pink through the close-cropped hair. He looked like a Norman Rockwell painting as he grinned at her and slapped the side of his tank. He also looked barely old enough to shave.

“Oh, no problem. I know things have gotten a little disorganized-“

Yeah, they had to use artillery to blast their way back into New York after the last riots, she thought.

“-but we won’t be hard on your logistics. This baby has the latest, ultra-top-secret-burn-before-reading-then-shoot-yourself stuff.

“Ionic powerplant.” At her blank look, he expanded: “Ion battery. Most compact power source ever developed-radical stuff, ma’am. Ten years operation at combat loads; and you can recharge from anything, sunlight included. That’s a little diffuse, but we’ve got five acres of photovol screen in the dispenser. Markee”-he blushed when she raised a brow at the nickname-

“can go anywhere, including under water.

“We’ve got a weapons mix like you wouldn’t believe, everything from antipersonnel to air defense. The Mark III runs its own diagnostics, it drives itself, its onboard AI can perform about fifteen or twenty combat tasks without anybody in the can. Including running patrols. We’ve got maps of every inch of terrain in the hemisphere, and inertial and satellite systems up the wazoo, so we can perform fire-support or any of that good shit all by ourselves. Then there’s the armor. Synthetic molecule long-chain ferrous-chrome alloy, density-enhanced and pretty well immune to anything but another Mark III.”

Bethany Martins ran a hand through her close-cropped black hair. It came away wet with sweat; the Atlantic coast lowlands of San Gabriel were even hotter than the interior plateau, and much damper, which the capital of Ciudad Roco added its own peculiar joys of mud, rotting garbage and human wastes-the sewer system had given up the ghost long ago, about the time the power grid did. Sweat was trickling down inside her high-collared suit of body armor as well, and chafing everywhere. Prickly heat was like poverty in San Gabriel, a constant condition of life to be lived with rather than a problem to be solved.

She looked around. The plaza up from the harbor-God alone knew how they’d gotten the beach ashore in that crumbling madhouse, probably sunk the ships and then drove it out-was full of a dispirited crowd. Quite a few were gawking at the American war-machine, despite the ungentle urging of squads of Order and Security police to move along. Others were concentrating on trying to sell each other bits and pieces of this and that, mostly cast-offs. Nothing looked new except the vegetables, and every pile of bananas or tomatoes had its armed guard. Her squad was watching from their UATV light six-wheeled trucks built so low to the ground they looked squashed, with six balloon wheels spun-alloy mesh. The ceramic diesels burbled faintly, and the crews leaned out of the turtletop of

their weapons. There were sacks of supplies on the back decks, tied down with netting, and big five-liter cans of fuel. At least we got something out this trip.

“What I’d like to know,” she said to Vinatelli, “is why GM can build these, but we’ve got to keep Guard division in Detroit.”

“You haven’t heard?” he said, surprised. “They pulled out of Detroit. Just stationed some blockforces around it and cut it loose.”

Acid churned in Martin’s stomach. Going home was looking less and less attractive, even after four years in San Gabriel. The problem was that San Gabriel had gone from worse to worst in just about the same way. The difference was that it hadn’t as far to fall. “We’re supposed to ‘demonstrate superiority’ and then pull out,” Martins said. “We kick some Glorio butt, so it doesn’t look like we’re running away when we run away.” The twisting hill-country road looked different from the height of the Mark III’s secondary hatch. The jungle was dusty gray thorn-trees, with some denser vegetation in the low valleys. She could see it a lot better from the upper deck, but it made her feel obscene and vulnerable. Or visible, which was much the same thing. The air was full of the smell of the red dust that never went away except in the rainy season, and of the slightly spicy scent of the succulents that made up most of the local biota. Occasionally they passed a farm, a whitewashed adobe shack with thatch or tile roof, with scattered fields of maize and cassava. The stores in the few towns were mostly shuttered, their inhabitants gone to swell the slums around the capital-or back to their home farms or in the countryside, if they had a little more foresight. Everyone was keeping their distance from the Mark III, too, as soon as it loomed out of the huge dust-cloud. So much for stealth, she thought, with light-infantry instincts. The Glorious Way will be laughing fit to piss their pants when we try to catch them with this mother. “Only thing is,” Martins went on, “we don’t need a Mark III to kick Glorio butt. We’ve been doing it for three years. Maybe they could send us some replacements, and a couple of Cheetah armored cars, like we used to have, or some air support, or decent supplies so we didn’t have to live off the local economy like a bunch of goddam feudal bandits. All of which wouldn’t have cost half as much as sending this hunk of tin down to roar around the boonies looking purty and scaring the goats.”

The rest of the convoy were keeping their distance as well. Her UATV was well ahead, willing to take point to keep out of the dust plume. The indig troops and the supplies were further back, willing to eat dust to keep away from the churning six-foot treads. Kernan’s rig was tail-end Charlie, just in case any of the indigs got ideas about dropping out of the convoy. Not that she’d mind the loss of the so-called government troops, but the supplies were another matter. She looked down. The newbie was staring straight ahead in his recliner, two spots of color on his cheeks and his back rigid.

“Hell, kid,” she said. “I’m not mad at you. You look too young to be one of the shitheads who poured the whole country down a rathole.”

He relaxed fractionally. “Maybe things’ll get better with President Flemming,” he said unexpectedly. “He and Margrave are pretty smart guys.”

“And maybe I’m the Queen of Oz,” Martins said. This one still believes in politicians? she thought. God, they are robbing cradles.

Or possibly just being very selective. You got enough to eat in the Army, at least-even down here in San Gabriel, admittedly by application of ammunition rather than money. Maybe they were recruiting extremely trusting farmboy types so’s not to chance another mutiny like Houston.

Christ knew there were times when she’d felt like mutiny herself, if there had been anyone to mutiny against down here.

She put her eyes back on the surroundings. More thornbush; she clicked her faceplate down and touched the IR and sonic scan controls. Nothing but animal life out in the scrub, and not much of that. Certainly no large animals beyond the odd extremely wary peccary, not with the number of hung-

men with guns who'd been wandering around here for the last decade or so. "Why don't you shut the hatch, ma'am?" Vinatelli said. "Because I like to see what's going on," Martins snapped. "This bandido country."

"You can see it all better from down here, El-T," he urged.

Curious, she dropped down the rungs to the second padded seat in the interior of the hull. The hatch closed with a sigh of hydraulics, and the air cooled to a comfortable seventy-five, chilly on her wet skin. It smelled of neutral things, filtered air and almost-new synthetics, flavored by the gamine scent of one unwashed lieutenant of the 15th Mountain Division. Her body armor made the copilot seat a bit snug, but otherwise it was as comfortable as driving a late model Eurocar on a good highway. Martins was in her late twenties, old enough to remember when such things were possible even if rare.

"Smooth ride," she said, looking around.

There were the expected armored conduits and readouts; also screens spaced in a horseshoe around the seats. They gave a three-sixty view around the machine; one of them was dialed to maximum magnification, and showed the lead UATV in close-up. Sergeant Jenkins was leaning on the grenade launcher, his eggplant-colored skin skimmed with red dust, his visor swivelling to either side. There was no dust on it; the electrostatic charge kept anything in finely divided particles off it.

"Maglev suspension," Vinatelli said. "No direct contact between the road-wheel pivot axles and the hull. The computer uses a sonic sensor on the terrain ahead and compensates automatically. There's a hydrogas backup system."

He touched a control, and colored pips sprang out among the screens. "This's why we don't have to have a turret," he said. "The weapons turn, not the gunner-the sensors and computers integrate all the threats and funnel it down here." "How'd you keep track of it all?" she asked. "Hell of a thing trying to choose between fifteen aiming points when it's hitting the fan."

"I don't, anymore'n I have to drive," Vinatelli pointed out.

It was then she noticed his hands weren't on the controls. Her instinctive lunge of alarm ended a fraction of a second later, when her mind overrode it.

"This thing's steering itself?" she said.

"Yes ma'am," he said. "Aren't you, Markee?"

"Yes, Viniboy," a voice said. Feminine, sweet and sultry.

Martins looked at him. He shrugged and spread his hands. "Hey, it's a perfectly good voice. I spend a lot of time in here, you know?" He waved a hand at the controls. "Best AI in the business-software package just came in, and it's a lot better than before. Voice recognition and tasking. All I have to do is tell it who to shoot and who to like." "I hope you've told it to like me, corporal," she said flatly.

"Ah-Markee, register Martins, Lieutenant Bethany M, serial number-" he continued with the identification. "Lieutenant Martins is superior officer on site. Log and identify." Martins felt a brief flicker of light touch her eyes; retina prints. The machine would already have her voiceprints, fingerprints and ECG patterns.

"Acknowledged, Vini. Hello, Lieutenant Martins. I'm honored to be under your command for this mission. What are our mission parameters?"

"Getting home," Martins said shortly. Talking machinery gave her the creeps.

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant Martins. I will help you get home." Vinatelli noticed her stiffen. From the tone of his voice, it was a familiar reaction. "It's just a real good AI, El-Tee," he said soothingly. "Expert program with parallel-processing learning circuits. It's not like it was alive or anything, it just sort of imitates it." The machine spoke: "Don't you love me any more, Vini?" The sweet husky voice was plaintive.

Vinatelli blushed again, this time to the roots of his hair. "I put that in, ma'am. You know,

spend-“ -a lot of time alone in here,” Martins filled in.

“Hey, El-T,” the young noncom said, in a voice full of false cheerfulness. “You want a Coke?”

“You’ve got Coke in here?” she asked.

He turned in his seat, pushing up the crash framework, and opened a panel. “Yeah, I got regular classic, diet, Pepsi and Jolt. Or maybe a ham sandwich?” Fan-fucking-tastic, Martins thought. She looked again at the screen ahead of her; Jenkins was taking a swig out of his canteen, and spitting dust-colored water over the side of the UATV. Chickens struggled feebly in the net-covered baskets lashed to the rear decking. She felt a sudden nausea at the thought of being in here, in with the screens and the air-conditioning and fresh ham sandwiches. The thing could probably play you 3-D’ed ancient movies with porno inserts on one of the screens, too. Damned if I can see what it’s got to do with fighting. “I’m bailing out of this popcan,” she said. “Unit push.” Her helmet clicked. “Jenkins, I’m transferring back to the UATV.”

She heard a Coke can pop and fizz as she slid out of the hatchway. “What’s it like?” the young noncom said. He didn’t face around; they were coming up on the Remo bridge, and all three of the soldiers in the back of the UATV were keeping their eyes on station. So were the driver and those in the front.

“It’s a fucking cruise ship, Tops. Economy class, there’s no swimming pool.” “Big motherfucker,” Jenkins said; his position at the rear of the vehicle gave him a view of the one hundred and fifty tons of it. Even driving at thirty miles an hour they could feel it shaking the earth as it drove. “Surprised it doesn’t make bigger ruts.”

“Lot of track area,” Martins said. “Not much more surface pressure than a boot. Though God damn me if I know what we’re going to do with it. It isn’t exactly what you’d call suitable for running around forty-degree slopes and jungle.”

“Hey, El-Tee, neither am I,” Riverez said, from the other machine-gun.

“Shut up, Pineapple,” she said-the gunner was named for his abundant acne scars. “Hell, we can run air-conditioners and VCRs off it,” Jenkins said. “Christmas tree lights. Dig a swimming pool. Maybe rig up a sauna.”

“Can it, Tops,” Martins said.

The road was running down into one of the steep valleys that broke the rolling surface of the plateau. There was a small stream at the bottom of it, and a concrete-and-iron bridge that might be nearly a century old. The air grew damper and slightly less hot as they went under the shelter of the few remaining big trees. There were a few patches of riverine jungle left in the interior of San Gabriel but most-like this-had been cut over for mahogany and tropical cedar, and then the slopes farmed until the soil ran down into the streams. Really thick scrub had reclaimed the valley sides when the peasants gave up on their plots of coffee and cannabis. Although the latter was still cheap and abundant, one of the things that made life here possible at all. “Oh, shit,” Martins said suddenly, and went on the unit push. “Halt. Halt convoy. Halto.” As usual, some of the indigs weren’t listening. The Mark I provided a more than usually efficient cork, and this time they didn’t have to worry about someone driving an ancient Tatra diesel up their butts. Silence fell, deafening after the crunching, popping sound of heavy tires on gravel and dirt. The dust plume carried on ahead of them for a dozen meters, gradually sinking down to add to the patina on the roadside vegetation.

“What’s the problem?” Jenkins asked.

“The bloody Mark III, that’s the problem,” she replied, staring at the bridge.

“Hell, it hardly tears up a dirt road,” the sergeant protested.

“Yeah, it distributes its weight real good-but it’s still all there, all 150 tons of it. And no way is this pissant little bridge going to carry 150 tons. Vinatelli!” “Yes, ma’am?”

“You’re going to have to take that thing and go right back to Ciudad Roco,” she said. What

screwup. She must be really getting the Boonie Bunnies to have forgotten something like this.
“Because that bridge isn’t going to hold that monster of yours.”

“Oh, no problem, El-Tee,” Vinatelli said.

His voice was irritatingly cheerful. The voice of a man-a boy-who was sitting in cool comfort drinking an iced Coke. A boy who’d never been shot at, who hadn’t spent four years living in the daily expectation of death; not the fear of death, so much, as the bone-deep conviction that you were going to die. Who’d never fired a whole magazine from a M-35 into the belly of a Glorio sapper and had the bottom half of the torso slide down into the bunker with her while the top half fell outside and vaporized in a spray of fluids and bone-chips when the bagful of explosives he was carrying went off.

“Yeah, well, I’ll just drive down the bank and up the other side,” he went on. “Lemme check.

Yes ma’am, the banks’re well within specs.”

Martins and Jenkins looked at each other. “Corporal,” the lieutenant went on, “the water’s about sixteen feet deep, in the middle there. The rains are just over.” In fact, it would be a good time for an ambush attack. Luckily the Glorios had been pretty quiet for the last three months. Doubtless waiting for the 15th to withdraw, so they could try final conclusions with the indigs. So that what was left of them could. “That’s no problem either, ma’am.” A slightly aggrieved note had crept into the newbie’s voice. “Like I said, we’re completely air-independent. The sonics say the bottom’s rock. We’ll manage.”

“How come everything’s screwed up, but we can still build equipment like that?” Jenkins said.

Martins laughed. “Great minds,” she said. “Fuck it, we’ve got a spaceship ready to blast off for the moons of Jupiter, and the government’s lucky if it collects taxes on three-quarters of the country. They can’t get their shit together enough to pull us out.” The Mark III was edging down the bank of the river. The banks were steep, in most places; right next to the first abutments of the bridge they had been broken down in the course of construction, and by erosion since. Still fairly rugged, a thirty-degree angle in and out. A UATV would be able to handle it, and even swim the river gap against the current-the spun-alloy wheels gripped like fingers, and the ceramic diesel gave a high power-to-weight ratio. The tank wasn’t using any particular finesse. Just driving straight down the slope, with rocks cracking and splitting and flying out like shrapnel under its weight. Into the edge of the water until the lower three-quarters of the hull was hidden, with the current piling waves against the upstream surface-

“Lieutenant Martins,” the over-sweet voice of the AI said. “I detect incoming fire. Incoming mortar fire.”

A section of Martin’s mind gibbered. How? The hills all around would baffle counterbattery radar. The rest of her consciousness was fully engaged.

“Incoming!” she yelled over the unit push. All of them dropped down into the vehicle’s interior and popped the covers closed above them. The driver turned and raced the UATV back down the length of the convoy, past ragged indig troopers piling out and hugging the dirt, or standing and staring in gasping, mouthed bewilderment.

Then the bridge blew up.

“Eat this!” Jenkins screamed.

The 35mm grenade launcher coughed out another stream of bomblets. They impacted high up the slope above. Return fire sparked and tinkled off the light sandwich armor of the UATV; a rocket-propelled grenade went by with a dragon’s hiss just behind the rear fender and impacted on a cargo truck instead. The indig troops hiding under the body didn’t even have time to scream as the shape-charge warhead struck one of the fuel tanks built into the side of the vehicle. Magenta fire blossomed as the pencil of superheated gas speared into the fuel. Fuel fires rarely cause explosions, contrary

innumerable bad action shots. This was the rare occasion, as the ripping impact spread droplets in the air and then ignited them with a flame well above even the viscous diesel fuel's ignition point. A ball of orange fire left tatters of steel where the truck had been, flipped over the ones before and behind, and nearly tipped over the racing UATV. The little vehicle's low wheelbase and broad build saved it. It did slow down, as the driver fought to keep control on the steep slope above the road.

"Now!" Martins shouted, rolling out the back hatch. Riverez followed her, and they went upslope on a scrambling run until the trunk of a long-dead tree covered them. She knew that the bruises along her side would hurt like hell when she had time to consider them, but right now there were more important matters.

Shoonk. Shoonk. Shoonk.

The mortar fired again. The result was the same, too. Not much of the Mark III showed above the water and the tons of iron and shattered concrete which had avalanched down on it five minutes before. One set of 5mm ultras was still active, and it chattered-more like a high-pitched scream, as the power magazine fed slugs into the plasma-driven tubes. Bars of light stretched up, vaporized metal ablating off the depleted-uranium bullets. There was a triple crack as the mortarbombs exploded midair-one uncomfortably close to the height that its proximity fuse would have detonated it anyway. Shrapnel whamped into the ground, raising pocks of dust. Something slammed between her shoulder blades, and she grunted at the pain. "Nothing," she wheezed, as Riverez cast her a look of concern. "Armor stopped it. Let's do it."

It would be better if this was night; the Glorios didn't have night-vision equipment. Even better if this was a squad; but then, it would be better still if the Company was at its regulation hundred and twenty effectives. Best of all if I was in Santa Fe. She and the other Company trooper spread out and moved upslope. Martins had keyed the aimpoint feature of her helmet, and a ring of sighting pips slid across her faceplate, moving in synch with the motions of her rifle's muzzle. Where she put the pips, the bullets from the M-35 in her hands would strike. Sonic and IR sensors made the world a thing of mottles and vibration; it would have been meaningless to someone untrained, but to an expert it was like being able to see through the gray-white thornbush.

"Left and east," she whispered, sinking to hands and knees. The heat signature of the ancient .50 heavy machine-gun was a blaze in the faceplate, the barrel glowing through the ghostly imprints of the thornbush. It was probably older than she was, but the Soviet engineers had built well, and it was still sending out thumb-sized bullets at over three thousand feet per second. They would punch through the light armor of the UATVs without slowing. The AKs of the guerilla riflemen supporting it were visible as well; the men were fainter outlines. "Pineapple."

"In position."

"Now."

She slid the sighting ring over the gunner a hundred meters away and squeezed her trigger. Braaaap. The burst punched five 4mm bullets through the man's torso. The high-velocity prefragmented rounds tore into his chest like point-blank shotgun fire, pitching him away from his weapon and spattering blood and bits of lung over his loader. The other guerilla was fast and cool; he grabbed for the spade grips and swung the long heat-glowing barrel towards her. Braaaap. A little higher that time, and the Glorio's head disintegrated. He collapsed forward, arterial blood and drips of brain sizzling on the hot metal.

The riflemen were firing at her too, and she rolled downslope as the bullets probed for her. It was about time for-

Thud-thud-thud. Pineapple's grenade launcher made its distinctive sound as it spat out a clip of bomblets. They were low velocity, and there was an appreciable fraction of a second before they burst among the enemy. Fiberglass shrapnel scrubbed green leaves off the thorny scrub; it also sliced fles-

and the riflemen-the survivors-leaped up. Perhaps to flee, perhaps to move forward and use the numbers to swamp the two members of the 15th. Martins fired until the M-35 spat out its plastic clip. The UATVs were shooting in support from the edge of the road, effective now that the Glorios were out of their cover. By the time she slapped in another 50-round cassette of caseless ammunition, they were all down, caught between the two dismounted troopers and the machine-guns from the road.

The wild assault-rifle fire of the fifty or so indig troops with the convoy may have been a factor, but she doubted it.

“Get those turkeys to cease fire!” she snapped through the helmet comm to Jenkins. It took a moment, and another burst from the UATV’s machine-gun-into the ground or over their heads, she supposed, although it didn’t much matter. “We got the others to worry about.” The Glorio mortars had made three more attempts to shell the convoy. Pretty soon now they were going to get fed up with this and come down and party.

A dot of red light strobed at the bottom left corner of her faceplate, then turned to solid red.

“Makarov?” she asked.

“Took one the long way,” Corporal Kernan said laconically.

Damn. The big Russki had been a good troop, once he got over his immigrant’s determination to prove himself a better American than any of them, and he’d done that fairly quick-down here in San Gabriel, you were pretty sure of your identity, Them or Us. More so than in any of the Slavic ghettos that had grown up with the great refugee exodus of the previous generation. Damn. He’d also been the last of their replacements. In theory the whole unit was to be rotated, but they’d been waiting for that for over a year.

“The Mark III’s moving a little,” Jenkins said.

She could hear that herself, a howling and churning from the streambed a thousand meters to her rear; it must be noisy, to carry that well into the ravines on the edge of the stream valley. “Fuck the Mark III-“ she began.

A new noise intruded onto the battlefield. A multiple blam sound from the riverbed, and a second later the distinctive surf-roar of cluster bomblets saturating a ravine two ridges over from the road. Right after that came a series of secondary explosions, big enough that the top of a ball of orange fire rose over the ridgeline for a second. Echoes chased each other down the river valley, fading into the distance.

“Well,” she said. “Well.” Silence fell, broken only by the rustling of the brush and the river.

“Ah, Pineapple, we’ll go take a look at that.”

Somehow she didn’t think there would be much left of the guerilla mortars or their operators.

“Pity about that Mark III. Looks like it might have been good for something at that.”

“Vinatelli, come in,” Martins said, perched on one of the bridge pilings. Close up, the Mark III looked worse than she’d thought. Only the sensor array and two of the upper weapons ports showed. The bulk of the hull was buried under chunks of concrete, wedged with steel I-beams from the bridge. Limestone blocks the size of a compact car had slid down on top of that; the Glorios had evidently been operating on the assumption that if one kilo of plastique was good, ten was even better. She couldn’t argue with the methodology; overkill beat minimalism most times, in this business. Water was piling up and swirling around the improvised dam, already dropping loads of reddish-brown silt on the wreckage. With the water this high, the whole thing would probably be under in a few hours and might well back up into a miniature lake for weeks, until the dry season turned the torrent into a trickle. “Vinatelli!” she said again. If the radio link was out, someone would have to rappel down there on a line and beat on the hatch with a rifle-butt.

The newbie had come through pretty well in his first firefight, better than some . . . although to be sure, he hadn’t been in any personal danger in his armored cruise liner. It was still creditable that he

hadn't frozen, and that he'd used his weapons intelligently. He might well be curled up in after-action shock right now, though.

"Lieutenant Martins," the excessively sexy voice of the tank said. Christ, how could Vinatelli do that to himself? she thought. The voice made her think of sex, and she was as straight as a steel yardstick. Mind you, he was probably a hand-reared boy anyhow. Maybe a programming geek made the best rider for a Mark III.

"Vinatelli!" Martins began, starting to get annoyed. Damned if she was going to communicate with him through a 150-ton electronic secretarial machine. McNaught's voice came in over the Companel push. "Martins, what's going on there?" "Mopping up and assessing the situation with the Mark III, sir," Martins said. "It's screwed the pooch. You'd need a battalion of Engineers to get it loose." "Can you get the UATVs across?"

"That's negative, sir. Have to go a couple of clicks upstream and ford it. Double negative on the indig convoy." Who had cleared out for the coast as soon as they'd patched their wounded a little; so much for the supplies, apart from what her people had on their UATVs . . . supplemented by what they'd insisted on taking off the trucks. "What if you shitcan the loads, could you get the UATVs across then?" "Well, yeah," she said, her mind automatically tackling the problem. Use a little explosive to blow the ends of the rubble-pile, then rig a cable . . . the UATVs were amphibious, and they could anchor them against being swept downstream, no problem. "But sir, we need that stuff." "Not any more we don't," McNaught said grimly. She sat up. "Just got something in from Reality."

That was the U.S. Martins extended a hand palm-down to stop Jenkins, who was walking carefully over the rocks toward her. The Captain's voice continued: "The President, the Veep, the Speaker and General Margrave were on a flight out of Anchorage today. A Russian fighter shot them down over the ocean. No survivors."

"Jesus Christ," Martins whispered. Her mind gibbered protests; the Russians were a shell of a nation, and what government they had was fairly friendly to the US. "Nobody knows what the hell happened," McNaught went on. "There's some sort of revolution going on in Moscow, so they aren't saying. The East African Federation has declared war on North Africa and launched a biobomb attack on Cairo. China and Japan have exchanged ultimatums. There are mobs rioting in DC, New York, LA and not just the usual suspects, in Seattle and Winnipeg too. General mobilization and martial law've been declared." Martin's lips shaped a soundless whistle. Then, since she had survived four years in San Gabriel, she arrowed in on practicalities:

"How does that affect us, sir?"

"It means we're getting a tiltrotor in to collect us in about six hours," he replied. "CENPAC told the 15th HQ element at Cuchimba to bring everyone in pronto-they want the warm bodies, not the gear. We cram on with what we carry and blow everything else in place. They're sending heavy lifters to pick up what's left of the division and bring us home from Cuchimba. If you read between the lines, sounds like complete panic up there-the Chiefs don't know what to do without Margrave, and Congress is meeting in continuous session. Much good that will do. Sure as shit nobody cares about San Gabriel and the Glorios any more. Division tells me anyone who isn't at the pickup in six hours can walk home, understood?"

"Sir yes sir," Martins said, and switched to her platoon push.

"All right, everyone, listen up," she began. "Jenkins--"

"What did you say?"

"This unit is still operable," Vinatelli's voice replied.

My, haven't we gotten formal, Martins thought furiously. "I told you, newbie, we're combatlossing the tank and getting out of here. Everyone is getting out of here; in twenty-four hours the only Amci in San Gabriel are going to be the ones in graves. Which will include Corporal Vinatelli if you don't

get out of there now.”

Behind her the first UATV was easing into the water between the two cable braces, secured by improvised loops. The woven-synthetic ropes were snubbed to massive ebonies on both banks, and with only the crew and no load, it floated fairly high. Water on the upstream side purred to within handspan of the windows, but that was current. The ball wheels spun, thrashing water backward; with his head out the top hatch, Jenkins cried blasphemous and scatological encouragement to the troops at the wheel and used his bulk to shift the balance of the light vehicle and keep it closer to upright. Most of the rest of her detachment were out in overwatch positions. Nobody was betting that the Glorios wouldn't come back for more, despite the pasting they'd taken.

You could never tell with the Glorios; the death-wish seemed to be as big a part of their makeup as the will to power. Revolutionary purity, they called it. “Lieutenant,” Vinatelli said, “this unit is still operable. Systems are at over ninety-five percent of nominal.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, the thing's buried under four hundred tons of rock! I'm combat-losing this corporal. Now get out, that's a direct order. We're time-critical here.” “Corporal Vinatelli is unable to comply with that order, Lieutenant.” “Hell,” Martins said, looking down at the top of the Mark III superstructure, where fingers of brown water were already running over the armor.

It looked like she was going to leave two of her people here dead. The kid had frozen after all, and it took the form of refusal to come out of his durochrome womb, rather than catatonia. Frozen, and she was going to kill him-when the ham sandwiches and Coke ran out down there, if not before. There was certainly nothing she could do about it. Sending a team down with a blasting charge to open the hatch didn't look real practical right now. Even if they had time, there was no telling what someone like Vinatelli's mental condition might do, besides which the tank was programmed to protect its own integrity. And she certainly had better things to do with the time. A whump of explosive went off behind her; Kernan making sure the captured Glorio weapons weren't any use to anyone.

“Max units, pull in,” she said, and began climbing back to the cable anchor point to board Kernan's UATV. Behind her, a thin muddy wave washed across the top surface of the Bolo Mark III.

“Comrades, we have won a glorious victory!” Commandante Chavez shouted. He was standing in front of the crater where the guerilla mortars had been. For sixty meters around, the trees were bare leaves and twigs; they sparkled in the afternoon sunlight, a fairy garden of glittering glass fibers. The crater where the ready ammunition had gone off was several meters across; the enemy had arranged the bodies of the crew-or parts thereof-in more-or-less regular fashion, the better to count them. Nothing useable remained. “The giant tank filled some of our weaker comrades with fear,” Chavez went on. The ground that he paced on was damp and slightly greasy with the body fluids of several Glorios, and the bluebottles were crawling over it. “They wanted to run and hide from the monster tank! “Yet we-mere humanity, but filled with the correct ideological perspective-triumphed over the monster. We buried it, as the Glorious Way shall bury all its enemies, all those who stand between suffering humanity and utopia!”

With several of the commandante's special guards standing behind him, the cheering was prolonged. And sincere; they had destroyed the tank that had been like nothing anyone had ever seen before. Now it was just a lump in the river below the fallen bridge. “Onward to victory!” Chavez shouted, raising his fist in the air. The Caatinga River was powerful at this time of year, when the limestone soil yielded up the water it had stored during the brief, violent rains. Maximum flow was in May, well after the last clouds gave way to endless glaring sun and the fields shriveled into dust-cracked barrenness where goats walked out on limbs to get at the last shoots.

Now it backed at the rock dam created by the bridge. The lower strata were locked together by the girders, and the upper by the weight of the stone and the anchoring presence of the tank; its pyramid shape made it the keystone. Water roared over the top a meter deep, and the whole huge mass ground

and shifted under the pounding.

“Vini, the water will help,” the Mark III said. “I’m going to try that now.”

Mud and rock and spray fountained skyward, sending parrots and shrikes fleeing in terror. Boulders shifted. A bellowing roar shook the earth in the river valley, and the monstrous scraping sound of durachrome alloy ripping density-enhanced steel through friable limestone. “It’s working.”

“Talk about irony,” Jenkins said.

“Yeah, Tops?” Martins replied.

Jenkins had had academic ambitions before the university system pretty well shut down. “Yeah, El-Tee. Most of the time we’ve been here, the Mark III would have been as useful as a boar hog to a ballerina. The Glorios would have just gone away from wherever it was, you know? But now we just want to move one place one time, and they want to get in our way-and that big durachrome mother would have been real useful.”

“I’m not arguing,” she said.

The little hamlet of San Miguel de Dolorosa lay ahead of them. The brief tropical nightfall was over, and the moon was out, bright and cool amid a thick dusting arch of stars, clear in the dry upland air. In previous times troops had stopped there occasionally; there was a cantina selling a pretty good beer, and it was a chance to see locals who weren’t trying to kill you, just sell you BBQ goat or the sisters. Right now there were a couple of extremely suspicious readings on the fixed sensors they’d scattered around in the hills months back, when they decided they didn’t have the manpower to patrol around here any more. Suspicious readings that could be heavy machine-guns and rocket launchers in the town. There were no lights down there, but that was about par for the course. Upcountry towns hadn’t had electricity for a long time, and kerosene cost real money.

“It’s like this,” Martins said. “If we go barreling through there, and they’re set up, we’re dogmeat. If we go around, the only alternate route will eat all our reserve of time-and that’s assuming nothing goes wrong on that way either.”

Jenkins sighed. “You or me?”

Somebody was going to have to go in and identify the sightings better than the remotes could do it, and if the Glorios were there, distract them up close and personal while the UATVs came in.

“I’d better do it, Tops,” she said. The squad with the two vehicles was really Jenkins’. “I’ll take Pineapple and Marwitz.”

Half the string of mules were in the water when the Glorio sergeant-Squad Comrade-heard the grinding, whirring noise.

“What’s that?” he cried.

The ford was in a narrow cut, where the river was broad but shallow; there was little space between the high walls that was not occupied by the gravelled bed. That made it quite dark even in the daytime. On a moonless night like this it was a slit full of night, with nothing but starlight to cast a faint sparkle on the water. The guerrillas were working with the precision of long experience, leading the gaucho mules down through the knee-deep stream and up the other side, while a company kept overwatch on both sides. They were not expecting trouble from the depleted enemy forces, but their superior night vision meant that a raid was always possible. Even an air attack was possible, although it was months since there had been any air action except around the main base at Cuchimba.

When the Bolo Mark III came around the curve of the river half a kilometer downstream, the guerrillas reacted with varieties of blind panic. It was only a dim bulk, but the river creamed away in plumes from its four tracks, and it ground on at forty KPH with the momentum of a mountain that walked.

The sergeant fired his AK-a useless thing to do even if the target had been soft-skinned. A bar of light reached out from the tank’s frontal slope, and the man exploded away from the stream.

hypervelocity slugs.

A team on the left, the western bank, of the river opened up with a four-barreled heavy machine gun intended for anti-aircraft use. They were good; the stream of half-ounce bullets hosed over the Mark III's armor like a river of green-tracer fire arching into the night. The sparks where the projectiles bounced from the density-enhanced durachrome were bright fireflies in the night. Where the layer of softer ablating material was still intact there was no spark, but a very careful observer might have seen starlight on the metal exposed by the bullets' impact. There were no careful observers on this field tonight; at least, none outside the hull of the Mark III. The infinite repeaters nuzzled forward through the dilating ports on its hull. Coils gripped and flung 50mm projectiles at velocities that burned a thin film of plasma off the ultradense metal that composed them. They left streaks through the air, and on the retinas of anyone watching them. The repeaters were intended primarily for use against armor, but they had a number of options. The one selected now broke the projectiles into several hundred shards just short of the target, covering a dozen square yards. The tank ripped into the multibarrel machine gun, its mount and incidentally its operators-like a mincing machine pounded down by a god. Friction-heated ammunition cooked off in a crackle and firework fountain, but that was almost an anticlimax.

"Cease fire! Cease fire!" Comrade Chavez bellowed.

It was an unnecessary command for those of the Glorios blundering off into the dark, screaming their terror or conserving their breath for flight. A substantial minority had remained, even for the threat. They heard and obeyed, except for one team with the best antiarmor weapons the guerrillas possessed, a cluster of hypervelocity missiles. One man painted the forward tread with his laser designator, while the second launched the missiles. They left the launcher with a mild chuff of gas and then accelerated briefly with a sound like a giant tiger's retching scream. If the missiles had struck the tread, they would probably have ripped its flexible durachrome alloy to shreds-although the Mark III would have lost only a small percentage of its mobility. They did not, since the tank's 4mm had blown the designator to shards before they covered even a quarter of the distance to their target. The operator was a few meters away. Nothing touched him but one fragment tracing a line across his cheek. He lay and trembled, not moving even to stop the blood which flowed down his face from the cut and into his open mouth. Two of the missiles blossomed in globes of white-blue fire, intercepted by repeater rounds. A third tipped upwards and flew off into the night until it self-destructed, victim of the laser designator's last twitch. The fourth was close enough for the idiot-savant microchip in its nose to detect the Mark III and classify it as a target. It exploded as well-as it was designed to do. The explosion forged a round plate of tungsten into a shape like a blunt arrowhead and plunged it forward with a velocity even greater than the missile's own.

It clanged into the armor just below the muzzles of the infinite repeaters, and spanged up into the night. There was a fist-sized dimple in the complex alloy of the tank's hull, shining because it was now plated with a molecule-thick film of pure tungsten.

"Cease fire," Chavez screamed again.

The Bolo Mark III was very close now. Most of the mules had managed to scramble up on the further bank and were galloping down the river, risking their legs in the darkness rather than stay near the impossibly huge metal object. Men stayed in their positions, because their subconscious was convinced that flight was futile. The tank grew larger and larger yet; the water fountained from either side, drenching some of the guerrillas. Comrade Chavez was among them, standing not ten feet from where it passed. He stood erect, and spat into its wake. "Cowards," he murmured. It was uncertain exactly who he was referring to. Then more loudly: "The cowards are running from us-it fired nobody but those actively attacking it. Fall in! Resume the operation!"

It took a few minutes for those who had stayed in their positions to shake loose minds stunned by

the sheer massiveness of the thing that had passed them by. Collecting most of the men who'd fled took hours, but eventually they stood sheepishly in front of their commander. "I should have you shot," he said. A few started to shake again; there had been a time when Chavez would have had them shot, and they could remember it. "But the Revolution is so short of men that even you must be conserved-if only to stop a bullet that might otherwise strike a true comrade of the Glorious Way. Go back to work!"

Bethany Martins gripped the bowie in hatchet style, with the sharpened edge out. The blackened metal quivered slightly, and her lips were curled back behind the faceplate in a grimace of queasiness and anticipation. The weapon was close to the original that Rezin Bowie had designed, over a foot long and point heavy, but the blade was of an alloy quite similar to the Mark III's armor. It had to be sharpened with a hone of synthetic diamond, but it would take a more than razor edge and keep it while it hacked through mild steel. The Glorio sentry was watching out the front door of the house. She could tell that from the rear of the building because it was made of woven fronds, and they were virtually transparent to several of the sensors in her helmet. She could also tell that all the previous inhabitants of the three-room hut were dead, both because of the smell and because their bodies showed at ambient on the IR scan. That made real sure they wouldn't blow the Glorio ambush, and that was also standard procedure for the Way. The inhabitants of San Miguel had cooperated with the authorities, and that was enough. Cooperation might include virtually anything, from joining a Civil Patrol to selling some oranges to a passing vehicle from the 15th. Generally speaking, Martins hated killing people with knives although she was quite good at it. One of the benefits of commissioned rank was that she seldom had to, any more. This Glorio was going to be an exception in both senses of the word.

Step. The floor of the hut was earth, laterite packed to the consistency of stone over years of use and brushed quite clean. A wicker door had prevented the chickens and other small stock outside from coming in. There was an image of the Bleeding Heart, unpleasantly lifelike, over the hearth of adobe bricks and iron rods in the kitchen. Coals cast an IR glow over the room, and her bootsoles made only a soft minimal noise of contact.

Step. Through behind the Glorio. Only the focus of his attention on the roadway below kept him from turning. He was carrying a light drum-fed machine gun, something nonstandard-it looked like a Singapore Industries model. Her body armor would stop shell fragments and pistol-caliber ammunition, but that thing would send fragments of the softsuit right through her rib cage. Step. Arm's length away in pitch blackness. Pitch blackness for him, but her faceplate painted it like day. Better than day . . .

Martins' arm came across until the back of the blade was touching her neck. She slashed at neck height. Something warned the man, perhaps air movement or the slight exhalation of breath, perhaps just years of survival honing his instincts. He began to turn, but the supernally keen edge still sliced through neck muscles and through the vertebrae beneath them, to cut the spinal cord in a single brutal chop. The sound was like an axe striking green wood; she dropped the knife and lunged forward to catch the limp body, ignoring the rush of wastes and the blood that soaked the torso of her armor. She dragged him backwards. The machine gun clattered unnoticed to the ground.

The lieutenant dragged the guerilla backward, then set him down gently on the floor. Only a few twitches from the severed nerve endings drummed his rope-sandaled heels against the floor. She paused for a moment, panting with the effort and with adrenaline still pulsing the veins in her throat, then stepped forward into the doorway.

"Jenkins," she murmured. A risk, but the Glorio elint capacity had never been very good and had gotten worse lately. "I'm marking the heavy stuff. Mark."

From point-blank, the shapes of machine-guns and rocket launchers showed clearly. She slid the

aiming pips of her faceplate over each crew-served weapons position, then over the individual riflemen, the second-priority targets. Each time the pips crossed a target she tapped a stud on the lower inside edge of her helmet, marking it for the duplicate readout in Jenkins' helmet. The guerrillas had tried their best to be clever; there were low fires inside a number of the houses, to disguise the I signatures, and as backup there were bound civilians grouped in what resembled fire teams around pieces of metal-hoes, cooking grills and the like-to fox the sonic and microradar scanners. Some of them were so clever that she had to spend a minute or two figuring them out. When in doubt, she marked them.

It occurred to her that an objective observer might consider the technological gap between the Company's troopers and the Glorios unfair. Although the gross advantage of numbers and firepower the guerrillas had these days went a long way to make it up. On the other hand, she wasn't objective and didn't give a damn about fair.

"Got it," Jenkins said.

"Pineapple, Red?" she asked. Short clicks from Ramirez and Marwitz. She slid her rifle around settling down to the ground and bracing the sling against the hand that held the forestock. The aiming pip settled on the rear of the slit trench that held the .51. Four men in the trench . . .

"Now." Diesels blatted as the UATVs revved up and tore down the road toward the village. She stroked her trigger, and the night began to dissolve in streaks of tracer and fire. A cantina disintegrated as Pineapple's grenade launcher caught the RPG team waiting there. "Shit, why now?" Martins said.

Captain McNaught's voice in her ears was hoarse with pain and with the drugs that controlled it. He could still chuckle.

". . . and at the worst possible time," he said.

Firebase Villa was on fire this night. The mortars at its core were firing, their muzzle flashes lighting up the night like flickers of heat lightning. Shump-shump-shump, the three-round clips blasting out almost as fast as a submachine-gun. The crews would have a new set of rounds in the hopper almost as quickly, but the mortars fired sparingly. They were the only way to cover the dead ground where Glorio gunners might set up their own weapons, and ammunition was short. Bombardment rockets from outside the range of the defending mortars dragged across the sky with a sound like express trains. When the sound stopped there was a wait of a few seconds before the kthru of the explosion inside the perimeter.

The pilot of the tiltrotor cut into the conversation. "I got just so much fuel, and other people to put out," he said. His voice was flat as gunmetal, with a total absence of emotion that was a statement in itself.

"Can you get me a landing envelope?" he said.

"Look, we'll cover-" Martins began.

A four-barreled heavy lashed out toward Firebase Villa with streams of green tracer. Yellowwhites answered it; neither gun was going to kill the other, at extreme ranges and with both firing from narrow slits. The Glorio gun was using an improvised bunker, thrown up over the last hour, but it was good enough for this. Parts of the perimeter minefield still smoldered where rockets had dragged explosive cord over it in a net to detonate the mines. Some of the bodies of the sappers that had tried to exploit that hole in the mines and razor wire still smoldered as well. Many of the short-range guns around the perimeter were AI-driven automatics, 4mm gatlings with no nerves and very quick reaction times.

"Hell you will, Martins," McNaught wheezed. "There's a battalion of them out there. I think-" He coughed "-I think Comrade Chavez has walked the walk with us so long he just can't bear the thought of us leaving at all." The captain's voice changed timber. "Flyboy, get lost. You try bringing that bird

down here, you'll get a second job as a colander."

"Hell," the pilot muttered. Then: "Goodbye."

Martins and McNaught waited in silence, except for the racket of the firefight. The Glorios crunched closer, men crawling forward from cover to cover. Many of them died, but not enough, and the bombardment rockets kept dragging their loads of explosive across the sky. It's not often you're condemned to death, Martins thought. Her mind was hunting through alternatives, plans, tactics—the same process as always. Only there wasn't anything you could do with seventy effectives to attack a battalion of guerrillas who were hauling out all the stuff they'd saved up. Even if it was insane, insane even in terms of the Glorios' own demented worldview. "Bug out," McNaught said, in a breathless rasp. "Nothing you can do here. They're all here, bug out and make it back to the coast, you can get some transport there. That's an order, Lieutenant."

If there was anything left to go back north for. The latest reports were even more crazyconfused than the first.

"Save your breath, sir," she said.

The Company had been together down here for a long time. They were all going home together. One way or another.

"Movement," someone said. She recognized the voice of the communications specialist back at Villa. Like everyone else, she doubled in two other jobs; in this case, monitoring the remote sensors. "I got movement . . . vehicle movement. Hey, big vehicle." Nobody said anything for a minute or two in the draw where the two UATVs waited.

"That's impossible," Martins whispered.

The technician's voice was shaky with unshed tears. "Unless the Glorios have a 150-ton tank, it's not happening anyway," she said.

They were a kilometer beyond the Glorio outposts in the draw. The river ran to their left, circling a wide arch around Firebase Villa. Water jetted in smooth arcs to either bank as the Mark III climbed through the rapids. In the shallow pools beyond the wave from the treads was more like a pulsing light. Then the tank stopped, not a hundred meters from the UATVs' position. "Vinatelli," Martins breathed. "You beautiful little geek!"

The tank remained silent. Another rocket sailed in, a globe of reddish fire through the sky.

"What are you waiting for?" Martins cursed.

"I have no orders, Lieutenant," the newbie's voice said. "Last mission parameters accomplished."

Something dead and cold trailed fingers up Martin's spine. He's gone over the edge, she thought. Aloud, she snapped: "Fight, Vinatelli, for Christ's sake. Fight!" "Fight whom, Lieutenant?"

"The Glorios. The people who're attacking the firebase, for fuck's sake. Open fire."

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant."

The night came apart in a dazzle of fire.

* * *

"I think I know-I think I know what happened," Martins whispered. Nothing moved on the fissure plain around Firebase Villa, except what the wind stirred, and the troopers out collecting the weapons. It had taken the Mark III only about an hour to end it, and the last half of that had been hunting down fugitives. The final group included Comrade Chavez, in a well-shielded hillside cave only three clicks away, which explained a great deal when the tank blew most of the hillside away to get at it. He'd been hiding under their noses all along.

She slung her M-35 down her back and worked her fingers, taking a deep breath before she started climbing the rungs built into the side armor of the Mark III. Some of them were missing, but that was

no problem, no problem . . . The hatch opened easily. Vinatelli must have had his crash harness unhooked when the bridge blew. From the look of the body, he'd been reaching for a cola can. His head must have been at just the right angle to crack his spine against the forward control surfaces.

"So that's why Vinatelli didn't want to come out," she said.

McNaught was watching through the remotes of her helmet. "So it is alive," he said. Martin shook her head, then spoke: "No." Her tone shifted. "Markee. Why didn't you go back to the coast?"

"Mission parameters did not require retracing route," the tank said, in the incongruously sultry voice. "Last established mission parameters indicated transit to point Firebase Villa." "What are your mission parameters. Correction, what were your mission parameters."

"Lieutenant Bethany Martins is to go home," the machine said. Martins slumped, sitting on the floor combing. The smell inside wouldn't be too bad, not after only six hours in air conditioning.

"It was Vinatelli," she said. "He was the dreamy sort. He had it programmed to do a clever Hans routine if an officer started making requests when he was asleep, and reply in his own voice."

"Clever Hans?" the captain asked.

"A horse somebody trained to 'answer' questions. It sensed subliminal clues and behaved accordingly, so it looked like it understood what the audience was saying. You can get a good AI system to do the same thing, word-association according to what you say. You'd swear it was talking to you, when it's really got no more real comprehension than a toaster." "Why did it come here?"

"That was the last order. Go to Firebase Villa; it's got enough discretion to pick another route out of its data banks. And to shoot back if attacked in a combat zone. But that's all, that's all it did. Like ants; all they've got is a few feedback loops but they get a damned lot done." She rose, shaking her head.

"Which leaves the question of what we do now," the Captain said.

"Oh, I don't think there's much question on that one," Martins said.

She pulled off her helmet and rubbed her face. Despite everything, a grin broke through. "Pretentious ignorant bastard, she thought, looking down at Vinatelli. The tank was everything you said it was. She'd been right too, though: a newbie was still cold meat unless he wised up fast. "We're all going home. With Markee to lead the way."

CAMELOT

S.N. Lewitt

They shouldn't have named this place Camelot. Even I know that, in the end, the dream didn't hold. That entropy and chaos and the end of law overcame all the massed forces of chivalry of the age. And in this age there never was any chivalry to begin with. But then I came here too, to forget the wars and the dead and the stink of battlefields. Ten years ago this was a wonderful place, a bustling town surrounded by rich green fields. There was plenty for everyone and plenty left over to trade for the technology we couldn't produce ourselves. We had to buy the small psychotronics that cleaned the streets and kept the walls repaired, the weather planner and the genetics scope that we mostly bought to use on the sheep for breeding purposes, but sometimes was used by married couples who had trouble conceiving or by the medical center to diagnose some rare genetic anomaly. I was not the only immigrant to Camelot. Even with strict restrictions on citizenship, at least a quarter of the population were refugees. We had run from the wars, from the Empire, from the restrictions of the technovers from the normal life that normal people lead near the center of the universe. Not everyone likes the bug life of the techno-urbs. Some of us waited for years for our permission to emigrate was granted and years more to pass all the psych probes required for permission to enter Camelot.

It had been worth it. After the death and power I had seen, the gentle green hills and gossip in the town square were better than anything a medvac healing team had even devised. I had enough in saved wages to buy a small pear orchard in the valley with a stone house and a cow. I could forget the war here. The smell of death, of putrid flesh and fusing circuitry, had been reduced to the merest shred of memory. If at night I sometimes dreamed of hulks greater than the Camelot Town Hall thundering over ravaged terrain, the charge of the Dinochrome Brigades, it was my own secret.

After three years of sanity, tending the trees and milking the cow, I married a native Camelot girl. Isabelle brought her chickens and her geese to the yard, started a kitchen garden with dill and rosemary and thyme, and filled the house with the sounds of singing. Isabelle had a voice like the angels, and she sang as she worked and she worked all the time. And when I dreamed of the war, of the flaming Hellbore frying an Enemy outpost, a single Bolo left powerless and dead on the field, my best friend found mindless in an Enemy holding pen, Isabelle would hold me and tell me it was all over now and give me warm milk and a slice of fresh pie. And I could believe that it was all over, that I had found perfection. I had, in fact, found Paradise. And I kept wondering when the dream would be shattered.

Ten years of peace and prosperity and laughter lulled me. Ten years when the worst thing that happened was the night the weather planner went out and we had to put out ancient smudgepots among the trees. When the worst thing that happened was the fear that little Margaret's fever would never break and Isabelle and Ricky and I kept running to the stream for snow melt to cool her. When the worst thing was Gwain Thacher leaving Emily and their four children and running off with Eli Chase.

And so, when the first attack came, I was not prepared.

They were not the Enemy I had fought in mankind's wars. Those were things I could hate without reservation and identify without thought. This enemy was our own, a force of thirty humans in the rustbucket of a ship that landed out in the Abbey's cornfield. Ships didn't land in Camelot valley. They were directed to Dover Port, where they were properly vetted and the trade delegations sat full time to regulate prices. The warehouses with the surplus wool and fine lace, the elegant pottery and

ironwork and glass, crowded the edge of the Port. Strangers never came so far as town, and we didn't want them. At first we thought this must be a ship in distress. Why else would they land in a cornfield, killing off an acre of crops? And out where it was inconvenient and there was nothing to do and no trade items waiting for their cargo bays.

The monks were the first to arrive, and then a few of us farmers. A large number of young people who should have been tending sheep and milking cows and making cheese gathered quickly, glad of any excuse from their chores. We waited for a long time, and finally the bell called the monks to the chapel, before the hatch opened and the visitors came down. I should have known. By that time I should have realized that the rustbucket was up to no good, that any ship that wouldn't open up to get clean air and the monks' good ale was trouble waiting. But, as I said, after ten years my instincts were dulled and my memories reduced to bad dreams, and I had wanted it that way.

So when the hull seals opened and the first of them appeared and jumped to the ground in surplus assault suits, armed with a motley collection of power rifles, needlers and laser sticks, I was shocked as any Camelot native who had never seen these weapons before. There were at least twenty of them, blast shields in battle-ready over their faces and weapons pointing at the small crowd.

They looked nothing like the military I had left. The assault suits were patched with a blinding array of colors, the weapons looked worn and dirty. No commander in my time would have held rank for long with this crew to show for it. And the one who came out last was the sloppiest, his assault suit covered with long ribbons that blew loose ends to the breeze. One of the girls nearby giggled. "He looks like a Maypole," she whispered to a friend. The giggles spread rapidly through the group.

"We want your wool, and also your cider and a case of the Abbey's brandy," the maypole said rasping. I couldn't tell if the voice was real or on distort through the helmet's speakers. "And whatever jewelry you have. You have some nice silver work here, I've heard. I want it here, piled up right on this spot, by sundown."

"Man's crazy," one of the farmers muttered. "Twenty against all of us? Hell." The maypole must have heard that. He signalled to one of the anonymous attackers holding a power rifle. The single weapon blasted through the group and Gavin Fletcher and Gwynneth Jones lay smoking dead on the young green corn.

"Now, I didn't want to do that," the maypole announced. He sounded somewhat pleased. "But now that we know we can't trust you, we're going to have to collect for ourselves. For protection, you understand. You pay the tax and we protect you." He laughed unpleasantly. I wanted to kill them the way where they stood. A tax? This was outright robbery. This was something I had left behind, escaped when the final documents were sealed making me a citizen of Camelot. This was something I could not accept.

I wanted to kill them. But I turned and ran back to my house, to Isabelle singing while she kneaded the bread, to Ricky carefully tending the vegetables and reciting his times tables. To Margaret, who toddled after her mother and pulled the loaf pans down off the table. When I was twenty-two and received my commission in Command, I would have done anything rather than run. When I was twenty-two I didn't have a family to protect, a family that immediately overrode any of the old catchwords like courage and honor and pride. I got to the house and hustled Isabelle and the children into the root cellar. It was strong and well-built, and the door overhead was heavy. Then I gathered up what we had, the few pieces of jewelry and a pitcher that had been my grandmother's and the silver-worked frame of the picture of Isabelle in her wedding dress.

I took them all and piled them at the door. And when the anonymous trooper showed up with his laser stick and his blast shield down, I handed it over without words. All I could think of was to get him out of the house before he heard Margaret cry. Before Ricky decided to run upstairs and help out. I had never known so much fury, and so much fear.

The thief took my small pile without so much as a glance, threw it all into a sack already half full with the goods of other households down the road, and left. I watched him go, raging at his back at Pirates. Thieves. I had never hated our alien Enemy half so much as I hated these humans who threatened my community, my family.

I waited until the rag-tag colors on the assault suit disappeared before I opened the cellar door.

“What was that?” Isabelle asked, shaken.

I told her about the ship and Gavin and Gwynneth.

She shook her head slowly. “Geoffery, I know you left the war behind you. But you know things about you and your refugee friends, that we don’t. We’ve never had to fight on Camelot before. I think maybe, it is time to remember.”

She stroked my cheek with her work-rough hands, her large dark eyes soft and full of sorrow. Not fear, but sadness that I would have to bring back what I had fought so hard to forget. That evening everyone stayed in at their own hearths, watching for the strangers to leave. The next day I didn’t want to go out far from the house, from the children. If one of those blastshielded troopers came back I wanted to be there to make sure he died or left, but that Ricky and Margaret were safe. And so I was sitting in the doorway sharpening my pruning axe when Frederick came by.

“Lo, Jazz,” he said. I winced. I had left that name ten years ago. Jasper was not a real Camelot name, and all immigrants were encouraged to take on names that were “appropriate.” I had become Geoffery. And Fidel Castanega had become Frederick Case. But Fidel and I, when I was still Jazz-for-Jasper, had served together in the 1st Battalion of the Dinchrome Brigade, in Command Status. Talking to the great hulks of the Mark XXX Bolos who had been, in their own strange way, friends as well as comrades. Fidel and I went way back, but we never talked about those days now.

Frederick Case was a cabinetmaker, the best in three counties. Just as he had been one of the best psychotronic techs in the Brigade. Even now, when he had renounced his past as thoroughly as I had renounced mine, he was sometimes called in to fix the simpler psychotronic machines that Camelot owned.

He never charged for the job, either. “You pay me to make something out of wood,” he’d say. “You want to pay me, you commission something nice, some of those harp-back chairs or maybe a linen press. Haven’t made a linen press in a while. But to do this, no, everybody helps out the way they can. Let’s just let it ride.”

I’d actually heard him say it just that way on two occasions. And he never called me Jazz.

Never. He respected my desire to live in the present as much as he respected his own. “So, Jazz, you hear the news? That damned pirate said that he was coming back in three months for harvest,” Frederick said. His face was dark red and his hands were clenched. “You hear that? We have to do something, old buddy.”

I hadn’t heard and the thought of it made me want to kill something right there. Like that maypo-guy. He would do for a start.

“So what can we do?” I asked. “Organize a patrol of us who remember how from the old days?”

Frederick nodded. “I kind of thought of that. We’re having a meeting down at the church tonight after supper. And since you were an officer, Jazz, you’d be a natural at it.” I shut up for a while. Sure I’d go. But I hadn’t ever commanded men. I never drilled with power rifles, not that we had any on Camelot anyway. I never was infantry. I only knew Bolos, and they were a far cry from Camelot.

After six weeks it was hopeless. Frederick and I had spent every evening with the Volunteer Force down in the town square. Three hundred men, young women and a few adolescent boys had managed to learn to throw kitchen knives and did close order drill with rakes. They couldn’t hold off the pirates for three seconds.

“What we need is guns,” old Edward Fletcher said at the meeting after church. “We need power

rifles as good as theirs, and laser sticks. Otherwise we might as well just all slit our throats with our ploughblades.”

There was a sudden cheering in the pews. Even the monks nodded sagely to each other. “Real weapons,” the priest said, calling for order, “are going to cost money. And since the raid we don’t have any.”

“We’ll raise it,” old Edward countered. “Because we might as well roll over and die if we don’t.”

The priest called me and Frederick and William Yellowhair and Thomas Blacksmith, who had once served in the alien wars far away, up to the front and held a little meeting of our own.

“If we had the weapons could we hold off the pirates?” the priest asked. He was another Camelot native and had never seen a real fight in his life.

Not one of the four of us said anything for a full fifteen seconds. Finally Thomas took the diplomatic approach. Thomas had always been very good at that, as General Bolling’s aide-de-camp. “Well,” he said slowly, “we surely can’t even think of trying if we don’t have any real weapons. Though no guarantee we can even find a decent supply of power rifles, let alone laser sticks. And if we found a supply I’m not sure we could afford them. But like we are, Old Edward is right. We might as well roll over and play dead straight off, because we don’t have a chance in Hell. Begging your pardon, sir.”

The priest didn’t even notice. “Well, then,” he said briskly. “We’ll see about some funds. I believe that the Abbey has some stashed away, an old donation they’ve been saving for an emergency. If we managed some cash, would the four of you be willing to go out and act as agents, and try to bring back whatever we can use to save ourselves?” Frederick and I looked at each other. We exchanged glances with William and Thomas, who had once been Bill Solestes and Tyrone X. Then the four of us nodded together. After all, we’d discussed it among ourselves, sitting at a table in William’s alehouse after a drill on a rainy day. We knew we needed something more serious than pitchforks and hog slaughtering knives.

“Happy to go, padre,” William said. “We’d all agreed, anyway. But I don’t think you quite understand just how much this is going to cost us. And then there’s the matter of using it well enough to make a difference.”

The priest shrugged. “We do what we can. We’ll pray for you here, and maybe God will help us find a solution we had not considered.”

I never thought that praying alone did all that much good. But the next day the priest arrived with what looked like a couple thousand credits worth of silver coins and candlesticks and a gold plate that had been buried under the Abbey apple press.

“Not nearly enough,” Frederick sighed, and I agreed, but we didn’t have any choice. Maybe the praying would help. I figured I’d been on Camelot way to long. We went over to the alehouse to catch the Dover Port and get a merchant schedule. Most houses in Camelot don’t have individual links, but the alehouse and the commercial establishments and the government all have them. It’s not that we’re unable to use technology here. It’s that we have chosen a different way. We don’t hate technology. Like I said, we use some simple psychotronics for tasks no one wants to do, but we aren’t going to make our lives around them, either. We live close to the earth, to things that are real, to each other.

The Slocum was leaving in two days for Miranda, a major hub in the sector. A center of corruption as well as trade. There was no shortage of arms dealers on Miranda, at least not ten years ago. And that sort of thing doesn’t change real fast in these parts. Isabelle packed my bag, washed and folded my old work suits in faded Command green. She also wrapped up a loaf of fresh brown bread and two cheeses, one sharp yellow one from our own cow and a softer sheep’s milk cheese as well. “Because there won’t be very nice food out there,” she whispered softly when she handed me the bundle at the door. “Come back soon. We’ll be waiting.”

I looked at them like I'd never see them again. Ricky, who can't wait to reach seven and be called Richard, stood straight, trying to be brave. Margaret was too young to understand and held out pudgy hands and chattered incomprehensibly. Leaving was the hardest thing I ever had to do. Miranda was just like I remembered it from my last trip out, the trip that brought me to Camelot for good. The city stank more than ten years ago and there were, if possible, more holosigns floating over the arcade. We ignored those and walked along the arcade floor, feeling like rubes from the outer worlds and not like the four vets of the alien wars at all. "Where the hell do we find a cheap arms dealer?" William Yellowhair asked rhetorically. Thomas Blacksmith smiled. "A few calls," was all he said. Thomas, having worked for the general who had accepted most of the credit for the tide-turning defeat of the Enemy at Torgon, had a lot of contacts.

We went into a bar that was nothing like the alehouse I'd frequented for the past decade. Here everything was chrome and holo and bright, and there were about seventeen hundred different drinks on tap. Thomas disappeared to the private phone stalls against the back wall while Frederick and I tried to order. Finally we just stuck to plain old Guinness, the drink of choice in the Regiment.

It came, and after William's homemade ale, it seemed thin and uninteresting. How wonderful we had thought Guinness was when we were in the field, how we talked about it at night when the Bolts were lit like Christmas trees with forty-eight colors of blinking lights, spitting out projectiles and energy at different rates of penetration.

Thomas returned as we finished the last of the pitcher. His glass was untouched, had never been filled. "What is it, guys? None for me, and I done all that talking?" Frederick shrugged. "It isn't as good as Will's, you're not missing anything. Come up with anything?"

Thomas still looked wistfully at the foam sliding down the sides of the empty pitcher. "Yeah, sure I did," he said dully. "Damn, I wish you guys had saved me a beer. Anyway, someone I heard about only, a real long time ago, you understand, is going to see us in about six hours. We've got to get over to his place and see what he's selling. I got the directions here, we're going to have to fence this stuff and get a car over there and we don't have a hell of a lot of time. Damn I could use a glass of the stuff."

Well, we didn't have a hell of a lot of time, but we had enough time to sit while Thomas had himself a Guinness and talk about how to turn the silver and one gold plate the Abbey had given us into hard cold credit. Miranda has lots of everything, and that includes pawn shops. Oldest damn profession, money grubbing, we even had one pawn lender/banker on Camelot. He had his offices at Dover Port and never went far from the port area. He never came into town proper. He wasn't really welcome among the locals.

We ended up selling the silver to an antique dealer, who gave us a better price than the pawnshop dealer. And we kept the gold plate as a final enticement. The antique dealer said it was worth more than he could afford to pay, and if we were willing to wait a couple of days he might be able to arrange something. We didn't have a couple of days, we wanted to get home with an arsenal as soon as possible and let the militia begin drilling. Maybe they would get in a whole two weeks of target work before we had to engage the pirates again. By four in the afternoon Miranda time we were out in the middle of nowhere, at the abandoned mine entrance where we were meeting with the dealer. It wasn't my idea of an arms dealer at all. This guy, who called himself Block, was more like a used rustbucket salesman. Too little, too slick, trying real hard to sell us two hundred year old projectile mortars that I knew were stressed to death and told him so. So we insisted on being taken inside. More verbal descriptions of various ordnance. We wanted to see it where it lay. And as soon as we stepped into the oversized cavern we saw the Mark XXIV. It was a rust-covered hulk, its towers fused and its battle honors near unreadable welded onto its turret. An antique, to be sure, and probably decommissioned. They do that with these guys when they get outmoded or die. Kill the power, kill the

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