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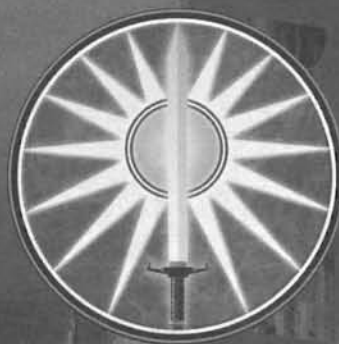
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FEDERATED SUNS™

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The rotary autocannon is based on an original weapon design by Jos Williams.

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HOUSE OF CARDS



Radcliffe
Kathil, Capellan March
Federated Commonwealth
0248 Local Time, 1820 TST
16 November 3062

"CAPFlight 4825, this is Badger 320. We have concentrated Redfox activity eight-five-zero mikes due north of our position, grid zed-three-seven. Request special inspection."

"Roger three-two-zero, stand by for inspection. Two victors inbound. ETA: forty-five seconds."

Leftenant Colonel Damien Zibler could barely make out the acknowledgement of his request over the din of the battle. Off to his right, a lance of *JagerMechs* churned out a steady hail of projectiles into the midst of an enemy formation, their tracers eerily lighting the pall of smoke hanging over the battlefield. A lightning bolt suddenly lashed out from one of his *JagerMechs*, briefly illuminating the scene of destruction as it slammed into a *Zeus*, showering the enemy group with sparks. Zibler watched flames erupt from the massive BattleMech's torso, soon engulfing the entire machine as its ammunition bins cooked off.

Behind him, he heard a succession of sonic booms, followed by the unmistakable spark-crunch of the hypersonic nickel slugs fired by his *Alacorns* slamming into the already beleaguered group. *They won't last long against that fusillade.* He quickly turned his attention back toward the hills ahead of him and the two companies of fresh BattleMechs approaching his battered battalion. *If those fast-movers don't do something soon, we're history!*

He made the mistake of glancing at a secondary monitor, which showed him just how bad off his own *Victor* was. Armor had been breached in almost every location, and he didn't need his computers to tell him his reactor shielding was barely maintaining containment. Unfortunately, he knew the rest of his battalion was faring little better. *How the hell did we get ourselves*

into this mess? Katherine Steiner, that's how!

Already the two companies belonging to the Eighth FedCom RCT—codenamed Redfox Group—were approaching attack range, and Zibler's air support was still some thirty long seconds away. "Badger Battalion, fall back to position Echo."

As the remainder of his battalion began to retreat, weapons fire lit up the advancing line. Zibler unconsciously braced in his command couch, dropping his cross hairs over the silhouette of an approaching *Salamander*. *Jim ... Jim Wendt. He was a royal ass at the academy, but ... Damn it! How did this ever happen?* He squeezed the firing stud before he even realized what he was doing, the thunder of his Gauss rifle further adding to the cacophony of the battlefield an instant before his own 'Mech was engulfed in a ball of fire. He felt more than a dozen missile impacts send chunks of armor and myomerfing, while four times that many exploded around him.

He's trying to take this out on me! Is that entire unit full of lunatics? Ordered to relocate to Halloran V, the Eighth RCT had instead launched a surprise attack on the Kathil CMM, claiming to be enforcing Archon Katherine's rightful rule over Kathil. Zibler's was one of the first Militia forces hot-scrambled to intercept the Eighth's advance toward Radcliffe.

Four of his 'Mechs were on the ground, unmoving. Two others and a tank rapidly were being consumed in a hail of missile explosions. A few more had simply broken formation and fled. *I don't blame 'em. In a stand-up battle, we're a match for the Eighth. Ambushed like this, though ...*

Swiftly closing the distance, the Eighth's 'Mechs began scoring more hits upon Zibler's rapidly thinning ranks. He punched down on his firing stud again. And again. And yet again, loosing a hypersonic slug each time into the enemy advance. *The enemy. I graduated with him.* He unconsciously stopped his own retreat, standing his ground astride a demolished mansion. *How did it come to this? No more!*

Beside him, one of his *JagerMechs* erupted into a ball of fire. He stabbed down one more time on the firing stud, smashing shards of armor from the torso of Wendt's *Salamander* before the paired lasers of an Eighth F-C *Penetrator* severed the mangled remains of his own *Victor's* right leg, sending him crashing to the ground.

Barely aware of the alarms warning him of his reactor's rapidly degenerating magnetic bottle, Leftenant Colonel Zibler watched as the entire enemy advance burst into the telltale wall of flame that only an incendiary bomb could produce. The two Militia *Corsairs* climbed away on their own tongues of blue flame. The center of the advance, once occupied by Wendt's *Salamander*, spit forth only a staccato of debris.

In that moment, the heat within the cockpit became so searing that Leftenant Colonel Damien Zibler no longer felt a thing.

No more!



INTRODUCTION

Victor,

These past several years have not been kind to us or to the nation that we have served for so much of our lives. We are virtual pariahs within that nation now—at least, so your sister would have everyone think. The truth, the *whole* truth, lies just below the layer of deceptions your sister has built up within the Lyran Alliance and the Federated Suns. I certainly do not need to tell you that—Jerrard's report from early this year has already provided you with a clear and concise briefing on the current state of affairs within the former Federated Commonwealth.

What you do need to know is that many of the men and women serving within the AFFC and the LAAF are beginning to see the cracks in the foundation—those who are willing to look beyond the rosy picture painted by Katherine's extensive public-relations staff, that is. During the past year, we have seen a polarization grip the former Federated Commonwealth. And with the events of the past few weeks, we have reached a turning point, one with a bleak outlook no matter which way we head.

The information contained within this document will help us forge ahead over the next several years. I strove to paint as nonpartisan a picture of the current state of the Armed Forces of the Federated Commonwealth as I could, giving all those concerned a true glimpse of the strengths and weaknesses gripping our nation's military.

The first section of this document, entitled *Evolution of the Fox*, details the history of the Armed Forces of the Federated Suns. The second, *The Fox's Den*, briefly analyzes the structure of the current AFFC, while the third, *Sharpening the Claws*, provides a look at the training and education provided our troops.

The fourth and final major section reviews every major combat command traditionally associated with the AFFS. Only approximately half of the units serving within the Federated Suns State Command are actually covered within the pages of this report. As I understand it, Grand Duke Kell's people have taken a similar approach to their report on the LAAF. Per your request, I have forwarded Morgan all the information we currently possess on the LAAF and the traditionally Lyran units operating within the FedSuns.

As you know, I have delayed this report for some time, constantly updating it with the most current information available from our sources. But I am afraid that the time to disseminate this information has finally come.

Please do not misunderstand. I love the Federated Suns. I stood by your parents through some of the worst fighting this galaxy has ever seen because I understood it was for the best, even though in my heart I only wanted to see the bloodshed end. I did not take action against Katherine because to do so would only have plunged the FedCom into civil war. It has now gone too far, however. Since the Solaris incident, many troops loyal to you have begun a passive rebellion against Katherine by reverting to the use of the traditional Federated Suns ranks.

I believe we can no longer stand by and watch our homeland be destroyed from the inside. I do not want to see even one innocent lose his or her life because of your sister. Unfortunately, the truth of the matter is that if we do not take action now, more will suffer in the long run.

It is the decision of the damned, and the man who makes that decision is the chief damned soul. God help us. God help us all.

Ardan Sortek, Major General
Director of Operations, SLDF
6 December 3062

