THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS

By BRIAN MCAFEE

AS THE MARS DIVISION PREPARES TO DEPART FOR EARTH...

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

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

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

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

History of the Third Robotech War, Vol IV

Chapter One

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hearing voices coming from around a bend in the corridor, the three ducked through an open door and into a storage room filled with old Robotech Master furniture and equipment that had been replaced with human equipment when the REF took over. Shran, Baz, and Dakon took cover behind a large console as the voices grew nearer.

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

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

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

They exited the building uneventfully; encountering no more guards. Soon they were back on the city streets, heading toward the spaceport on the other side of town. At the spaceport, the three Masters boarded a small red shuttlecraft of Perytonian design. The shuttle drew little attention as it arrived earlier that day, being a common sight these days, and it drew no more attention as it departed.

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

"Those foolish humans have no idea that they have lost the greatest treasure in the galaxy!" cried Shran. "Indeed," answered Baz, "with it we may take the entire galaxy for
our very own."
"Let us not celebrate yet, brothers, for there is still much work to be done," added Dakon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Something in the green of the jungle glinted in the sunlight and caught his attention. Jason slowed his alpha and descended to get a better look. There must have been some metallic object on the surface, hidden by the jungle canopy. Perhaps it was a relic of the battle to free Peryton from the Invid. It could be an alpha fighter or an Invid scout shot down during the liberation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason saluted smartly and headed off for the break room. The colonel had no time to deal with him today. The loss of an alpha fighter was a trivial matter next to the other issues that had popped up during the night.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aboard the Ikazuchi command carrier UES Roosevelt in orbit above Tirol, several pilots were called off of their normal duties to attend a briefing
with Captain McKinney, commanding officer of the ship. When they arrived in the briefing room, they were surprised to find that only four pilots were summoned for the briefing. Two of them already knew each other, Private Alex Summers, and Private Xavier Shanmaris were both alpha pilots from King Squadron. After talking with the other two pilots, they found out that they were Horizon-t shuttle pilots.

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

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

The Captain entered the room and the pilots stood at attention until he said, "As you were" and opened a folder containing papers and photos. The video screen came to life with a photo of a planet taken from orbit. The captain began, "Approximately six hours ago, we received a distress call from the REF outpost on Peryton. It is a small REF base left behind after the liberation of the planet from the Invid. All we know is that the Invid were sighted entering orbit. We lost communications with the base almost immediately, so we don't know how many Invid there might be. We will depart Tirol for Peryton along with two Garfish troop carriers in less than 3 hours. The three of you will recon the base and if necessary carry out a rescue of the surviving REF personnel. You can expect full orbit to ground fire support from our three ships. Prepare your mecha and be ready for immediate launch aboard a Horizon-t shuttle once we de-fold. The Horizon-t will be completely empty so it can accommodate the maximum number of survivors. Rescue of any REF personnel is the top priority for this mission. If the Invid have set up a hive, we will attempt to destroy it only if time and conditions permit. We must be back here in place to leave with the rest of the fleet no later than five days from now to ensure we can be re-supplied before we leave for Earth. Are there any questions?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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