

# Confessions of a Ward 6 Patient

Jawbreaker

Have you ever had a memory that wouldn't leave you alone? I have lots of them.

I have 32 plus years of memories that make me shudder with shame. They take my breath away and make my heart skitter and flop in my chest. They exist only to haunt me day and night. When I get bored or am forcing myself to concentrate on something I do not have any enthusiasm for, they spring up like odious little jack in the boxes. Gone are their rosy cheeks and painted faces. They have been replaced by demons; cackling green-skinned, drooling and soul hungry, their clawed fingers slicing at the air rabidly furious and demented. Vicious abominations whose only desire in life and now death is to make me writhe in agony.

No matter how hard I try I cannot rid myself of them. I know no inner peace, no rest, no solace or divine joy.

No silence.

Ever.

They, the authors of my night- and daymares, mean nothing in the way the universe spins. Two days after they're dead nobody will care that they lived at all. Much like me I suppose. It is only fair. After all I have excelled in little other than screaming and being a prick in general to everybody I meet on the street. In retrospect it is funny that I should find it nearly impossible to stomach that kind of treatment when it is applied to me; I guess that's what they call being a hypocrite.

Truth told I joined the service to kill and then die. I wanted and craved war more than I craved breathing. I wanted to be turned loose on a population and vent all of my rage at them. I wanted bodies piled high to the sun. Bloated stinking corpses serving as a warning to all: a fiend is near.

Ironically I never died, obviously, as I am writing this now. God has either a sense of humor, pity for me, or a cruel streak a light year wide -- or all of the above. Instead of letting me prove to the universe and the people who knew me and thought they were "bad" just how evil and dangerous and **bad** I really was because I, unlike them, was a true killer. I would do that and then I would die.

I have always known I was a killer. Ever since I turned five and fantasized about killing my father's relatives with a dull carving knife. Those foul stinking creatures whose own lives were little more than festering ulcerations in a deep moist crease of a giant, stinking intergalactic crotch. Yes, rank, vile, hopeless, worthless trolls who tormented me till the ends of their collective days.

*Now that that is said we can move on to other things...*

My name, if it is at all important to you, is Lem. I am a MechWarrior by trade. I am a skilled machine operator and purveyor of that one thing I crave above all others: Death. I don't mean yours, per say, but mine. I want the shame, torment and constant rage inside me to stop. Those things that boil my guts and keep me tied in knots, tight soaking wet knots that can't be undone.

When I dispense death I do it quite liberally, sometimes with glee other times with rage and other times with personal apathy. But never pity. I'm way too self absorbed for that.

To gain my attention on a battlefield is to covet death. There are some MechWarriors out there, like those chivalrous and flamboyantly stupid Knights of The Inner Sphere, who struggle and **offer** their own end to prevent the death of an opposing MechWarrior in battle. I scoff at them and their Captain General, Thomas-my-face-really-looks-like-crap-Marik. I feel it is callous and disrespectful to deny your opponent death if he is incapable of giving you yours. I know that everyone on the battlefield wants death as much as I do whether they know it or not, and I should be generous for **my** cup runneth over.

Prior to a particularly bloody, and my only, battle with everybody's favorite bastard children of Kerensky, Clan Ghost Bear, I was asked, "With what will you defend?" I spat at his face on my monitor and snapped, "With tooth and nail and a shot of Bourbon. You brainless prick!" He tried to remain stoic but raw venom in my voice startled him making his head jerk slightly back but I have to hand it to him because he just simply nodded and replied in that oh-so arrogant clan way, "Very well *surat*, I shall meet you in kind."

*Don't know how I lived through that one.*

I abide by no rules or conventions because I fully expect to die and because I know my opponent does too and if he or she can't fulfill my deepest desire I will fulfill theirs. I don't care how either. I'll use poison gas, nuclear bombs, or my bootlace and I hope that I will receive that kind of deference in return.

A psychiatrist once told me that I want to die, yeah? No shit! I actually paid him to tell me that. Another freegin genius he was. Trouble is I won't just let someone kill me outright or just stick my automatic in my mouth and see if I can pull the trigger twice. Chalk it up to not having enough courage.

I guess nothing is free.

Not even suicide.

But I'm digressing again.

I have been called by my fellow MechWarriors a needlessly cruel and heartless ghoul and all the rest of those associated phrases. But those who really know me, which counting myself is---nobody, know that I am only doing what I know how to do. You see some people are by nature pleasant, warm and loving. I'm driven, possessed and consumed with death.

I was once a bona fide warrior in the service of the Draconis Combine. I even served with the Alshain Avengers; just before they got really, really stupid and tried to take their world back. You didn't have to have a PhD in political science to know what that was going to get them. I almost felt sorry for those Nova Cat slobes that got it because of them. *But then I remembered they were a pack of racist clan bastards...*

Actually, it was that suckhead play on Alshain that got me bounced out of my 'Mech and the Combine. The DCMS called for a **personnel reliability review**. I called it a house cleaning. After a ten minute interview with some DEST agents my service record with the "Alshain Idiots" lying open on a bare steel table I was fired. Even with the big Bear chewing on their asses like they were all little rubber squeaky toys and needing every fighting warrior they had they handed me a payment voucher and a bus ticket to the

spaceport. No ifs ands or buts about it. Gone! Guess they were afraid that I might try to start my own revolution like those jerks fertilizing the fields of Alshain right now.

So now I'm dispossessed, near broke and stuck on some planet in the St. Ives Compact. Where? That right now is a mystery.

Never travel drunk. It just causes problems.

Anyway, Kai Allard is supposed to be turning Capellans into grease spots and chopped meat here in the Compact and I hear the Capellans are returning the favor with an unexpected degree of efficiency. As I sit on a bloodstained park bench writing this listening to the distant rumble of artillery I decide that it is here, wherever here is, I'm going to have to create an opportunity to do what it is I do or get what I need so badly. Only problem is I don't have a 'Mech. What I got is a poor attitude, alcoholic's diarrhea and six C-bills.

So I've been festering in my clothes for six days now. *Ha, six days- six C-bills*, and I've decided that I can't stand my own stink anymore and that I'm going to start scrounging the local combat zones for a new set of rags and then a unit and then, either by pirating, buying, or borrowing a 'Mech I'll get into this war and kill or, god willing, die.

As luck would have it I had taken to sleeping in a park under some leafy bushes that smelled like gardenias when a mob of Capellans appeared in armored troop carriers and assaulted the city from the west. As quickly as the Capellans arrived St. Ives troopers materialized on my East to slug it out with them. Needless to say it got sort of uncomfortable with the flurry of artillery and mortar rounds dropping everywhere chopping the ground up and slicing the air apart with shrapnel by the ton not to mention dismounted infantry from both sides hammering the bejeezers out of each other with machineguns and Short Range Missiles. It got to the point where I was actually looking at Capellans and St. Ives at the same damned time as they shot at each other. I could actually hear orders being shouted from both sides. Then it got **really** interesting. Instead of just moving towards each other directly they tried to flank each other by going through the tiny copse of trees I was hiding in but then something happened somewhere and they both dispersed. Just like that—Poof! Gone.

I was dumbstruck because I was expecting to get caught right in the middle and be trod on by both or either. I waited to see if they were going to come back and finish each other off and/or retrieve their dead. But by the time the really big bells in my head quit ringing it was still all clear.

There were quite a few bodies from both sides lying around and as luck would have it I found a team of St. Ives troopers that got wasted by a heavy artillery shell. More luck after that, two of them were my size and in one piece. *Yeah, I know what you're thinking, but it was lucky for me and that luck always counts even though I wished it was me lying in the dirt, concussion ruptured and just waiting around for the crows...*

I chose a junior sergeant's uniform. Concussion had gotten him too because he was still in one piece and had blood running out of his ears, eyes, nose and to my disgust, his anus. But clothes were clothes and scavengers can't complain. I did find about 1350 C-bills and a damned fine watch or two on the lot of them, so that made up for that whole

bleeding ass thing. But more importantly I had weapons, a uniform, and a map showing the path to the St. Ives lines.

I trudged East into the heart of the city who's park I had been living in and tried to ignore the voices in my head telling me how much of a worthless asshole I am and how I was a miserable human to boot.

"Shut up!" I shouted, "Can't you leave me the hell alone? Damn your black hearts! I swear you're all lucky your dead now cuz if you weren't I'd get a plasma cutter and some..."

I walked and yelled at the dead and walked and yelled and walked some more. I watched the cityscape gradually change from clean streets cluttered with evacuating civilians sided with polished ferrotitanium architecture into cracked and shattered walls and cratered streets filled with rubble smoldering wreckage and stinking bodies.

At the intersection of Kay Street and Longhouse avenues I found a **real** mess. There were at least six tanks slagged and burning in front of a ruined department store and blocking Kay Street completely. *Wherever that was.* I stepped through a shattered display window of the department store and over some dead guy who was lying across a nude mannequin to get around the wrecked tanks and burnt girders. I told the dead guy to "get a room," and giggled.

Close up I found that most of the wrecks were St. Ivers' *Bulldog* tanks and SRM carriers. But headfirst in a hardware was a 'Mech!!! But I was too late; a salvage crew was all over it like ration ants. Too bad - it was a solid looking ride. One of those new ones the Capellans were fielding. I think they call it a *Huron Warrior*. "*Oh well it 'aint over yet.*"

The intersection turned out to be a very busy road junction. Civilians on foot and in ground cars were carrying what measly possessions they could away from the area and military traffic going in the opposite direction hollered, honked and cursed at them as they forced their own way against the civilian flow in their green and brown utility trucks.

I milled around the intersection staying generally visible but pretending to try and be un-noticed, knowing eventually I'd be questioned by the field-jaegers and sent to a straggler's control point where I would be processed. *Which was my plan.* Go to a control point and shop for a unit.

As fate would have it the salvage crew that was trying to get the damaged *Huron Warrior* up were, from the looks of them, complete and total idiots. I couldn't help but smile as they swarmed it like monkeys with wrenches and plasma torches scratching their heads and picking at their butts trying to figure out how to get it up and running again. At one point some guy with oily blond hair shorted something out and got tossed into the street smoking and unconscious.

I lost it and laughing riotously, so loud in fact that the civilians trying to escape the area eyed me warily, thinking that I was as mad as a bloody hatter. The other salvage guys glowered and muttered curses at me.

A warrant officer with the largest nose I have ever seen was overseeing the salvage operation bellowed at me. "Can you do better wiseass!?"

"Maybe, maybe not, but I sure as hell wouldn't do what he did, I know a lot better than that." I gestured to the unconscious tech in the smoldering coveralls. Then I showed a little skill. "What I would do is ground out the secondary ignition field and run a hot lead directly from the cockpit to the primary field and use that until I got it someplace I could tear it down and clean up the wiring harnesses." I pointed to a slagged out portion

of internals, “Most of the time the main power coupling runs parallel to that heat shield right there, and the fact that its burnt tells me that the wiring harness is probably shorting out behind it.”

The warrant harrumphed at me, walked over to the fallen ‘Mech, pushed a pair of greasy techs aside and peered into the void I had gestured at. He gingerly poked around with a screwdriver, moving wires and flipping torn myomer out of his way to get a closer look. Shoving the screwdriver into his hip pocket he turned to me and said, “Okay wiseass, here’s the deal. I got less than an hour to get this piece of crap moving and safely in our possession. You get it going and I’ll give you 100 C-bills and a billet as one of my techs.”

I nodded and said, “You sir, have a deal.”

The *Huron Warrior* is really a marvelous piece of machinery by the way. I was truly impressed with the quality of its workmanship. It carries a respectable stock loadout and more than enough heat sinks to keep it cool while in action. Its armor is good and its top speed is all right too. Who’d a thought the Capellans could build anything besides a gulag that was worth a damn?

I ran a hot lead just like I said I would and I’ll be damned if it didn’t work like a charm! I know, I know, I said I was a MechWarrior and generally most MechWarriors only know the barest of things about their ‘Mechs but I grew up in a family crawling with ‘Mechs. When I mean family I don’t mean the scum-sucking pigs I dream of beheading with my entrenching tool. I mean my extended family on my mother’s side of the house. I even had an uncle who fought the Clans on Luthien.

They mailed him home in a very small box.

So anyway, I hid from my hated family by going down to the local garrison and getting an older cousin to finagle me a job as a ‘Mech bay tool caddy. So from age ten until I was old enough to apply to the academy and the DCMS I slithered my way through the innards of every kind of ‘Mech imaginable. I drug wires through conduits, spot welded lattices and hung myomer.

All of those acquired skills actually helped me more than anything else I have ever learned because my first ‘Mech was a *Jenner* that looked like it had been dropped from 10,000 meters with out a pod or a chute. Mud brown and leaking coolant from no less than 16 separate locations it was a sight to behold. All of my new lancemates laughed at me and told me that if I ever got going again I would die in it.

*I hoped they were right.*

Regardless I spent every spare waking moment working the faults out of that thing. I think I impressed my company commander because when she would come into the ‘Mech bay she would find me at work already or asleep inside it, having worked on it all night.

By the time I was done it was a damned fine little ‘Mech. I could get reckless to my little heart’s content and strain to fulfill my goal of dying. Trying to die got very aggravating back then. I was in a scout lance, which is usually a death sentence, and we were always dispatched to go out and find the enemy and try to destroy his scouting elements in the process and leave them blind as to our intentions on the battlefield. In this particular role my recklessness and nearly orgasmic rush towards death bred success after success. I would leap into a fray and blast away with SRMs and small lasers desiring to get cratered on the spot for wanton stupidity.

No such luck.

Instead I/we would inflict significant damage to his recon elements as to “muddy up” his or her take of the battlefield, tilting things in our favor. In other words: a fully successful mission. *Damned annoying if you ask me.*

I crawled into the gaping chest wound that had disabled the *Huron Warrior* and proved I wasn’t a gasbag or some other kind of “know-it-all-jerk”. Running the power leads just like I said I heard the gentle *Thruuummm* as the reactor came to life. I crawled back out and was just about to climb into the cockpit when some guy carrying a neuro-helmet dashed past me and climbed in.

Damn! I thought I might have just had a chance to grab this one up. I know, I know. I said I wasn’t interested in it but I am also really desperate. Besides, I’m allowed to change my mind aren’t I?

So instead of running off into the sunset in a stolen, beat-up Capellan ‘Mech and searching for my end again I rode a pot-holed road in a truck heading for---somewhere.

My newly adopted family of mechanic types, as it turned out, were not as friendly as I’d hoped they’d be. But in retrospect if having them as friends was a real concern I wouldn’t have laughed at them for being morons. But what they hell! They were the ones being stupid. I just pointed it out to them.

The guy who fried himself I’ve taken to calling “Smokey” is especially sore at me. All he’s done since he woke up is whine about how his hands hurt and give me dirty little sullen looks while holding his gauze wrapped hands up by his cheeks like a prizefighter. He tried to scowl in earnest at me once during the ride. What a riot! He squinted his mud brown eyes into wrinkly slits, scrunched up his blistered forehead and tried to snarl. I laughed at him and farted loudly.

Guess we won’t be friends.

At the base I saw the *Huron Warrior* and five other ‘Mechs in similar condition: beat to hell. They were all hanging in gantries inside of a hepatitis yellow ‘Mech bay getting repairs and it was there in front of that dismal mech bay that we stopped.

After the way I acted earlier I fully anticipated that I would be treated like shit by whomever I wound up with. I do know that you just don’t act the way I did (and do regularly) and not pay for it.

Yup! Sure as shit stinks I wasn’t wrong. The warrant officer who “hired” me called me from behind the truck up to meet the shop foreman and senior tech.

“Pat, Blackie this is--.” He pointed at me.

“Lem.”

“Lem,” he repeated my name for them in case they were too dumb to have understood me when I had said it a half second before. “He got the *Huron Warrior* up and running while the rest of your ingrates were picking their asses.”

Patrick looked me up and down with one of those looks that scream “I hate you.” and said, “Good for you.”

I decided I should correct him: “Not good for me. **Good for you!**” That startled him. I guess he wasn’t used to backtalk.

The warrant either ignored us or was oblivious because he carried on just like it was blues skies and sunshine. “Pat,” he said, “give Lem here a billet as your third wrench.”

“But that slot is already filled.”

“By who?”

“By Jaskoviak, that’s who.”

“Yeah? Well your boy Jaskoviak is going to need help undoing his pants to use the head tonight. So I know he’ll be out of the wrenching business for a while, so,” he pointed to me, “he’s your man.”

“Oh, you mean Smokey, right?” I injected myself into the conversation because I knew it would rub Pat raw. “Jaskoviak is his real name huh?”

The Warrant snickered, “Smokey----I like that.”

Blackie the Senior Tech was tall and beefy with a broad sloping forehead that looked like an armor slab. He’d stood by behind Patrick in low wattage mode. I guessed that higher brain functions were a bit of a stretch for him. He stood there not speaking and looked overwhelmed by all of Pat’s aggressive body language. I surmised that he couldn’t understand how and why I, a total stranger, could just appear out of the blue and talk shit to his boss and joke around his boss’s boss without getting pounded and like a protective dog sensing his master’s unease he stood at his full height and clenched and unclenched his fists waiting to be let off leash.

It could be worse.

I could be peeing on their legs too but I decided not to point that out. Instead I pointed across the ‘Mech bay at the gauze handed Jaskoviak, “He unloaded a class 7 capacitor with his body instead of a grounding rod.”

Pat glared at me and I met him full on not giving a damn about his station in life. He dropped his gaze “*You lose*” I thought, and mumbled in agreement to his new orders and said to my shoes, “The barracks is over on the north side. Go get yourself a bunk and a shower and report for the night shift.”

Instead of doing what I was told I scouted out a bottleshop and bought four liters of cheap Lyran Gin and had a few hits. It burned my nose and felt like I was swallowing broken glass. “Ahhh, that is SO MUCH BETTER!” I shouted in the store’s car park. Good and buzzed I went to the barracks to get a room.

After I dried off and pulled my clothes out of the wash-machine I took my newly issued set of crisp white sheets and general purpose itchy brown blankets outside and crawled under my new home and set myself up a little crawlspace hut, pulled out my needler and with the gin stifling the voices went to sleep.

Lying **under** my assigned room on that nice level patch of cool dirt I slept for about two solid hours when squealing floorboards and a heavy knock jolted me awake. Through the floor I heard someone say, “Nobody in there.”

“Where is he?”

“I dunno.”

It was Blackie. It had to be. Pat had sent his hammer headed attack dog to pay me a visit. I was impressed, thinking it was rather ballsy for him to come to my room so soon after my arrival to commit whatever mayhem or maiming he had on his mind.  
*I must have really pissed him off...*

At 2300 hours local time I finished a juice bottle I had earlier filled with gin and tossed it against the side of the building and walked through the giant doors of the ‘Mech

bay. I went to the foreman's office and checked my job assignment. I had the *Huron Warrior*...

*See what happens when you show off...*

Crossing the bay I saw that the *Huron Warrior* was tucked neatly away in the farthest, darkest corner of the bay. That parking job sent my inter-cranial alarm bells into an epileptic frenzy, clanging and banging insanely as they warned me of the trouble I already knew was coming.

The practical, rational, wanting to kill not die part of me sauntered up to the 'Mech gantry and scoped out the floor and everything else around me. I looked for really dark shadows and good hiding places and for any strategically placed tools that could become an improvised weapon so that someone with a bad attitude could get to work. I spotted a few big wrenches, a jack handle and a loaded plasma cutter lying around and mentally tagged their locations just in case.

A couple of times during the shift I had to cross the bay and request some specialty tools from a guarded tool room and both times I tried to strike up a conversation with my new co-workers. Both times I was rebuffed or ignored. I naturally assumed that they just didn't want to get attached to me because I wasn't going to be around long and they wanted to save themselves from the heartache of seeing me go.

*Yeah! Right! And I'm going to pass a DropShip out my colon too...*

I whistled like a happy idiot in my four-story graveyard, acting like I was full of bravado and had not a care in the world and not struggling to keep from bursting into tears as my grandfather called me names in front of my entire family when I was five and how everyone let me know just how much they hated me.

I actually had gotten a lot done by the time I heard heavy feet clomping up the metal stairs below me. I glanced down through the mesh floor and saw the Dog-Boy coming. Slowly he climbed the stairs each step deliberate and determined. *Clomp! Clomp! Clomp!* On his hairy face a very evil look sat like a fat woman on a barstool: Agonizingly oppressive. I picked up some tools, pocketed them casually and edged my way along the walk until I was behind the *Huron Warrior* and out of plain view. There in that ultra dark shadow I stuck my head inside an open access panel pretended to work.

When he, Blackie, arrived at my level his steps shook the walk under my feet which immediately got me thinking that I might not die tonight. But I might experience a great deal of pain, which I really, really hate.

I kept my head in that open panel and waited. As soon as he got close enough he stabbed me in the neck with a finger that was every bit as hard as a cold chisel. "Hey meat!"

I jumped, genuinely startled by the amount of pain one single finger could produce and yelped. Jerking my head out I rubbed the sore spot, "What gives!"

Blackie stepped closer and jabbed me in the chest twice as hard, which made my eyes cross and sent a squirt of piss into my clean, stolen cotton drawers. "I'll tell you what gives Meat." He jabbed at me at me again but this time I pivoted away enough to miss taking the shot but not to avoid getting grabbed by my coveralls and slammed against the *Huron Warrior's* backside and getting my skull banged off of it. With stars in my eyes and stripes of pain streaking through my neck and head he shoved his face up close to mine and with rancid morning breath said, "I'm the Bull Of The Woods here Meat! Me! Not nobody else, specially no wise ass puddle of shit like you!"

“Okay,” I agreed meekly, “You’re the Bull of the whatever you want. Just put me down before we both get in trouble, okay?”

He grinned with insane pleasure and pushed his hairy mop of a head closer and whispered, “Don’t choo worry none, Meat. Cuz I won’t get in any trouble at all, cuz-----.”

“You’re the Bull Of The Woods. Right?”

“Yup.”

He kept hold of my coveralls and walked me on tip-toes toward gantry’s flimsy railing and leaned me on it and over it a bit. I guessed that his plan was that he was going to push me over and tell everybody it was an accident. I was instantly outraged. **What a cheap shit murder plot!** I had really hoped for something better, something that would work. But **this?** I was always ready for something like this. Something-----dumb. One of the tools I had grabbed was a brass drift. It sat in my back pocket waiting, like me. It was roughly 30 centimeters long and 5 centimeters in diameter and had to weigh in at least a cool 3 kilos. Oh man! A real Coconut Cracker!

Blackie was so intent at looking into my eyes getting his happy off on seeing what he thought was terror in my face he didn’t even notice that I had pulled that same drift out of my back pocket and bring it around. And! He damned sure didn’t see it come crashing down on the top of his head. With a wet *scrunch!* it landed and split his scalp wide open and displayed his pulped skull to the light. He instantly let go of me and grabbed the top of his bashed head; a look of pain, surprise and a newly reduced IQ was on his face now. I guess I hit him just right because he was still conscious and semi-aware but he tottered about on the catwalk grating showing me that his equilibrium was nearly gone. I watched him as he staggered drunkenly and grunted across the catwalk all the while blood leaked out between his fingers. *What a head!* I mused as I watched him struggle to comprehend what had happened to him. *That shot would have killed me easy.* I let him stumble until he staggered backwards and leaned against the very same railing he was going to throw me off of. That gave me a thought. Turnabout is fair play they always say. I caught his gaze and winked at him and then I grabbed his legs and heaved until he flipped over the side. His body flailed on its way down to the ferrocrete where down there on the gray painted floor his head broke all the way open and splashed his putrid essence on it and the *Huron Warrior’s* foot. Looking down at his scrambled brains and shattered limbs I said, “Yeah Blackie you’re the Bull Of The Woods alright. But you see I’m the Cock-of-the-Walk.”

Pat came in wearing a happy smile until he saw it was me talking to the MPs and not Blackie. Freezing in mid-stride and stared at me not wanting to believe I was still alive and just for a micro-second a snarl crossed his face as he flipped through his mental catalogue of situation appropriate expressions, finding his “oh-my-god-what-could-have-happened” face he came over to where I was standing and for the MP’s sake asked, “What happened Lem?”

I thought it was sweet that he remembered my name considering he wanted me dead. “Blackie fell off my gantry---and --- died.” I said in my own theatrical “I’m-so-shaken-and-freaked-out” voice. Earlier, when I first started talking to the MPs my hands shook uncontrollably. The MP told me that it happens all the time, the shakes that is, and as soon as the shock wore off I’d be fine. He mistakenly assumed I was shocked and upset about the incident. In reality I was fired up, I mean, **really fired up!** I had to swallow an

insanely feral desire to kick and stomp Blackie's busted melon into fish paste and splatter it all over the 'Mech bay as he laid there waiting for his rubber bag.

He had come to kill me and failed in the worst way! I was furious at his failure. I had hoped deep inside that he would release me from my torture but he obviously wasn't worthy of earning my death. He was scum! A brain-dead amphibious puddle of urinary tract infection. He should have known I was no fool, nobody's victim of convenience, a toy to be chewed on by the likes of him or any other, other---- miscreant!! **Oh My God!!!!** I raged like a volcano. I wanted to kill him over and over again for his insult, his incompetence his addlebrained genetic birth defect of a life. Matter of fact, I had to convince myself not to go and erase his family from the planet's surface because I was sure that they were as worthless as he was.

But standing there talking to Pat and the MP I looked Pat in the eye and sent him a copy of the mental image I was looking at. It was an image of me kneeling on his chest, delighting at slowly gouging his eyes out with my thumbs and popping them like grapes. He must have gotten it because he shrunk down, buried his head as far down between his shoulders as possible and said softly, "I'll be in my office."

And that was that. We threw the same dry sweep we used on oil on the gooey puddle Blackie had left behind and I went back up to the *Huron Warrior* and kept on working all the time wishing I could kill him again and again and again.

Three days later the *Huron Warrior* walked out of my gantry. It had 95% of its faults repaired. The only ones I didn't fix were the ones I couldn't get or make parts for. Still, it looked good. It was painted and pretty. I even detailed its headdress with red and white tips.

*Sweet.*

I hadn't seen Pat up close since I dumped Blackie off my gantry. He stayed in his office and supervised through his office window. I heard that only after I left for the day would he actually come out onto the floor to supervise the dayshift. What a Sally.

The good news was I finally knew where I was. Warlock!

*Never heard of it...*

But the Capellans had because they're here. *Sheesh!* Damned Capellans. They are nothing but a bunch of thugs when you get right down to it. Never heard anything good comin from them or about them. All I've ever heard is that to go there was to ask for a bullet in the face. Executing people is a nobleman's pastime there. Or so I hear. But to put in perspective the old Combine lops a lot of heads off every year too. So I ask you what is one house from another?

Yeah, I know I'm not making any sense. But truth be told I hate everything and damned near everybody; especially myself. Anytime I say a good word its because I think the situation calls for it not because I mean it. You see, when I was a kid it always seemed that everything I liked or enjoyed got screwed up. Birthdays, Savior's Day etc... So I just got to the point of not really caring about anything or anyone because people always stab you in the back and once you find something you like it gets stolen or broken or generally screwed.

On the 12th day I was leaving when I saw Pat talking on his vid phone and smiling like a pimp on payday. The first thought that entered my mind was: somebody just got screwed. I was halfway out the door when I found out who.

“Hey Lem!”

Turning in the doorway I saw Pat was still wearing that smile. *I just got screwed.* I looked at him with open disgust.

“Grab your junk. You’re getting a promotion to lead wrench and salvage boss for a line unit.” He clapped his hands together enthusiastically, “Yep! You’re gonna be your own boss. Gonna have subordinates, responsibilities and---.”

“Ass-aches? Near death experiences? Shortages of everything but attitude and incoming?”

His smile drooped a little and his eyes got cold and dark, “You know it. And I hope you get killed you sonofabitch.”

*Feel the love...*

I caught a westbound cargo truck and rode for three hours. The driver was some pimply faced girl who must have thought she was a racing sled driver because I saw nothing but dust and felt nothing but physical pain as she roared down every dirt donkey trail she could find. On the plus side though I wasn’t alone. Smokey was with me. I guess Pat was pissed at him too. You see now if he’d just used a grounding rod like he should have he would be a whole lot better off. Guess some life lessons are harder to learn than others.

Smokey didn’t say a word during our white-knuckle ride. He just bounced around on the wooden slat seat and alternated between pouting and crying. Me? I was actually looking forward to going to the front, so to speak. I would be closer to ‘Mechs and an opportunity to get one or die or, I hoped, both, yeah, a ‘Mech and death.

*Either way I win.*

As the truck pulled into my new “home” I noticed two things right from the get go. Firstly my new unit was a grungy pack of sorry looking slugs. The second was, their ‘Mechs were even worse looking. I guess Kai Allard wasn’t in this unit.

I had to search around for the headquarters tent to let them know I was there and ask where the maintenance chief was so I might be able to get to work. The clerk in the tent entered my name onto the unit roster and looked at me like I was stupid when I asked, saying, “He’s with the ‘Mechs--dumbass.”

*Well, I guess it was a stupid question...*

Sure enough I found all the techs, including the chief swarming a *Penetrator* trying to get it mission ready. From the looks of it I figured that it had been penetrated in all kinds of ways. It was covered with ugly patchwork welds, primitive replacement armor slabs and five different colors of paint. It was beyond a doubt capital U ugly.

I stayed out of their way and let them have at the *Penetrator*. I didn’t want to disrupt any success they might be having.

Actually I’m lazy, but keep that to yourselves.

I used the time to look at the rest of the company’s ‘Mech compliment. It was quite disconcerting. No, scratch that---they were walking mechanical assholes, all battered and each one was in need of a major friggin miracle. I saw a soot- and mud-covered one-armed *Atlas* being uploaded with LRMs and a *Catapult* that looked like it had been catapulted into its gantry at 300 kph. A once smooth, ovoid chassis was rumped and creased like a tin football that had been played to death. And it just went downhill from there.

“Hey! Who are you?”

I looked back at the *Penetrator*. It was the chief. He was pointing a wrench.

“I’m your new wrench and salvage guy I guess.”

“Good!” He scratched at his coal black four-day beard with the same wrench he had pointed at me. “You’re just in time. They’re heading out in 60 ticks.” He was one of those guys whose teeth were always visible when they spoke and it was sickening because they looked like caramels painted with petroleum jelly. *Geeechhk!!* “Go draw some tools. Your trucks are behind that last gantry, the one with the *Catapult*. Quick as you can form up and wheel around to the assembly area with your guys to meet with the CO.”

*Talk about getting thrown to the winds.*

I spat into the dirt and thought to myself, *This sucks*, My trucks looked even worse than their ‘Mechs. I know! Who’d a thought that it could happen? They leaked oil like they had the clap. They had cracked bald tires that sprouted steel strands and shreds of polyester beltings from every sipe and more damned bullet holes than a Fed-Com’s backside.

Out of all the things in the universe I hate what I hate the most is screwed up equipment. My truck, the one that had the commo gear in it smelled like copper; bad, and the headliner was stained with blood. Spatter was everywhere, the seats, the doors . . . everywhere. “Wow, that is a lot of blood”. But I cheered myself up by saying, “Hey, maybe this’ll be my lucky truck.” And just to be a bastard I yelled to Smokey that he was riding with me. He kicked the dirt in anger and made his way up the truck’s built in ladder steps to sit down. When he looked around the cab and saw and smelled all the blood and dried gore his eyes bugged out.

“Oh hell no!” He cried, “I am not riding in this thing! Uh-uh!” and started climbing down.

“Get in here, sit down and shut up!” I shouted. “Quit being a girl!” He froze in mid step and looked at me, searching my eyes to see if I was serious or if he could kick my ass. I was and he couldn’t so he sat back down and latched his door and immediately began hugging himself and rocking in his seat like one of those retarded kids you see in elementary school busses. I looked at him and snorted “Sally.” I released the brake and got happy all at once. “Ya’ know Smokey, they just don’t make ‘em like they used to. Men that is.” I could only giggle when I got a look that screamed, “I don’t understand a damned thing your saying!” Throwing the truck into gear I shook my head, “Sarcasm is totally lost on you isn’t it?”

The CO turned out to be another lame legged refugee from a boy’s camp. Standing there in a cooling vest trying to talk tough. I can’t explain it to you. It’s just, well, after a while you know who has got the real stuff and who doesn’t. Maybe it’s the eyes, maybe it’s body language or just some weird aura but old timers like me can spot it like an inbound DropShip. Big and bright. This guy was a poser. The talk the hand gestures—everything. It was just all wrong. He reminded me of an accountant.

His MechWarriors gathered around him close, squeezing me out of their little huddle as they prepared to write in their tiny black notebooks.

The commander opened his noteputer. “Okay people here’s the mission: Movement to contact in sector King Alpha 9265. We’re going to move in to the southern border and sweep due north. Three Company will be to our east and Group W will be to our west.

It's a simple mission. Supposedly one of the Capellan's lesser units has holed up near the glade you see on your map. We're gonna find 'em and fix 'em."

I watched and listened and just to be stupid and obnoxious I started whistling softly and asking Smokey stupid questions like "If Kai Allard married his sister would he be his own cousin in law?" Which scared Smokey to death because just being near a disrespectful and ignorant individual like me can get you imprisoned some places. But this little pasty faced officer was totally uninspiring and I couldn't help myself and it didn't help the situation that this Hauptmann was about three centimeters taller than Vic Davion and weighed maybe 70 kilos soaking wet and was as pale as a saucer of cream. He was a mouse of a man. A mouse with greasy blonde hair, invisible biceps and a short man's attitude: making up for having nothing with big talk and posturing. When he was done briefing his MechWarriors dispersed and he came over to me and handed me a data disk.

"What's this?"

"You mean what's this--Sir. Don't you?"

"Uh huh. That's exactly what I meant."

"That is a list of things I want you keep you eye out for."

"A shopping list?"

"Yes, you may call it that."

"I see". I held the disk with two fingers, just as I would a snotty handkerchief and sucked on my teeth, making sure that I made that loud squeaking sound that when used in conversation correctly relays bitter contempt. *Squeak!* "Well then, I guess we'll follow you to the rally point and start; shopping—sir." *Squeak! Squeak!*

He nodded and made for his ride not understanding a single shred of my disrespect. Back home in the Combine I got 90 days hard labor for accidentally not adding "sir" to a statement. I was wasting some of my best stuff on these guys...

Back at the trucks "my section" had formed up and were ready to roll. My entire "section" looked like everyone else's ass, trash and headaches with a couple of miscreants and escaped felons thrown in for good measure. One guy had a purple flame-job tattooed on his neck, face and head.

*Whatever...*

There were two other bona fide techs assigned to the recovery squad. One was tall and skinny and had an Adam's apple that stuck out far enough for him to trip over and when he swallowed it traveled through two separate time zones before reappearing above his buttoned collar. The other was a fat faced guy with greasy, dandruff-laden hair and a twerpy exuberance that made me want to club him unconscious. His name was Meyer and he was the one of the bunch who had his act together. The tall guy was now leaning against a truck carving his girlfriend's name into his chest with a hunk of sharp wire and laughing as it bled.

Meyer asked me, "Did the CO give you a list of things to look for?"

I pulled the little red disk out and showed to him. "Do you mean this?"

"Uh-huh. He always gives us red ones." He snorted and laughed like a feeb, "He always gives us red ones, because what we do is important."

"Really?"

“Yeah, he says so all the time.” He smiled like he believed it. I almost felt pity for him until he jammed his hands inside his coverall pockets and started playing with himself.

*I cannot wait until I am dead!*

The trip out was uneventful.

Jaskoviak i.e. Smokey took a moment to tell me that he hated me and wished I were dead. That made me feel---good. To have somebody wish your same wish is a really nice thing. I smiled and thanked him in earnest.

His eyes boggled and he went back to hugging himself and rocking in his seat trying to find a happy place.

I made sure to keep my unit about two kilometers behind the ‘Mechs as they swept through a glade that bordered their engagement box. It was a pretty, serene and pastoral view. The ‘Mechs were in a neat close-knit skirmish line in a danger area and were slowly moving forward to their doom like a bunch of stupid cows in a slaughterhouse chute. Golden Fox tails and tall yellow and blue flowers brushed up against their legs as they churned the smooth knee high pond that was covered in lily pads and darting dragonflies into a chunky black soup unfit for life.

One look around told me that this was going to be it so I stopped my truck, killed the engine and waited for the show. The glade itself was in a faint depression bordered on the north and west by very dense wood line. I squinted into the trees and shook my head in disgust. I couldn’t see a ray of sunlight inside the woods and the trees were tall, damned tall, between 60 and 100 meters. In essence “my unit” was walking into black hole via a wide-open area.

Scrunching gravel signaled the arrival of **my** guys. In my side-view mirror I watched as 8 of the creepiest and freakiest gomers in the sphere came to get a look-see. I took a second to glance over at Smokey. He had switched from hugging and rocking to fidgeting and nail-biting for the last hour and I felt like it was time to ask him if he brought his testicles with him but my train of thought totally derailed by a smell. A smell that hit me like a right-cross in the nose and made me buck in my seat spasmodically. I swear I looked down to see if my nose was sprinting down the road squealing in terror, instead I came face to face with what I could only describe as a piss-sour mop on legs. This--thing was a man with a face nearly 80% obscured with a huge, mat-filled beard that left only his eyes and a bit of his cheeks exposed. His head was covered in a once blue and now shiny black rag tied in a knot on each corner, presumably to keep the vermin from nesting in it. His clothing was nothing more than a rag collection that made my own week-old rags from before look and smell like parade dress. He smiled up at me and said, “Hi.”

It was like looking into the devil’s sphincter. Lips that were split and bleeding crackled open to reveal 10 or 12 black and yellow teeth scattered inside a fleshy pink hole that smelled like dead, sun-bloated animals and a hundred million cigarettes.

“Oh—My—Christ!” I hollered in revulsion. I couldn’t believe that he or it was once or now human. “What in the nine rings of hell are you? And what do you want here, you filthy, stinking beast you!!”

He stopped cold and stared up at me confused. He didn’t understand what I was talking about. He opened his mouth to try again and I put my hand in his face palm up and shouted down at him, “You are the most disgusting thing I have ever seen and if you

do in fact work for me I am giving you a lawful order: You may not get closer than ten meters to me in your present state, you smelly piece of shit you. So, until you scrape the crud off of your narrow ass go stand over there,” I pointed across the road to the far ditch. If you don’t like it bathe, but I swear if you ever get as close to me as you are now I will kill you for treason! Now go!”

The rest of the crew looked at me like I was being cruel and heartless. I looked at them like they were ignorant geeks who should be eating live snakes and broken glass in a circus not here with me.

One my guys, he didn’t smell, or it was just that I couldn’t smell anything anymore, but did look like an escaped ax murderer, asked me what was going on. I rubbed feeling back into my nose and answered, “They’re gonna get killed here in a second or two.”

“Nuh-uh.”

I countered that bit of eloquence with a rapier sharp, “Uh-huh.”

“What makes you so sure.”

I looked down at him and held up two fingers “First, I know my shit. Second our commander doesn’t and that is enough. You just wait and see. That *Atlas* is gonna get pounded and then the *Catapult*.”

He scratched his ass at me and said, “Ahh, your full of----.”

He never finished. We were all overcome by a horrendous sound. Imagine, if you can, what the sound of a tank falling 20 stories down to a solid ferrocrete slab might sound like. Now multiply it times 50 and you’ll have the sound of an *Atlas* taking a gauss rifle slug straight on. I laughed out loud as hunks of armor and powdered endosteel flew off and swizzled through the air. The *Atlas* and its 100 ton mass swayed and staggered forward and backward and blindly fired its large laser into the tree line as its driver frantically struggled to keep it upright. The rest of the unit froze, of course, but politely kept their intervals, really not knowing what to do or where to go. In the Combine we’d call that poor training and a free lunch!

The *Penetrator* driver finally unscrewed himself and figured that standing still was a bad thing. He or she bolted forward in a desperate charge, firing at the hidden attackers. That action spurred the rest of them on, albeit in a disorganized clusterfuck kind of way but at least they were shooting and moving now.

I threw my feet up on my truck’s dashboard and tried adding color commentary just like they do for the Solaris fights.

Watching the *Atlas* I mugged a cartoon tough-guy voice: “That didn’t hurt. Not one bit. Shut up I always bleed like this! Now come out and fight me.” Righting itself, it squared its shoulders and girded its loins for battle again and took another gauss round dead center in its kisser. Down it went! Boom Splash Crash! And down it stayed, bubbling and steaming in the muck.

The *Catapult*, which I predicted would be the second ‘Mech to get vaporized was running around like a panic stricken turkey: forward, backward, left right. I even saw it flash some jump jets for nano-second and then a long purple streak of PPC lightning arced out of the woods and wrapped itself around its ovoid body and flash fried the paint right off of it and probably put its driver into a puking fit.

Me? I was rapt with joy as the battle flashed in front of me. I felt a longing for battle so powerful I wanted to grab my rifle and charge into the fray but I swallowed it down and forced myself to keep my eye on the *Catapult* that was gonna die.

And a sonic boom signaled it. The third gauss slug of the engagement slammed into its dangerously thin side armor, which was as evidenced by a vicious gout of fire and smoke that belched out of a giant new entrance hole. **“Oh man!”** I yelled and swung a fist into the empty air, **“That had to hurt!!”**

The *Catapult* fell stiff legged on to its side, shrieked like a bottle rocket momentarily and vanished into a blinding ball of yellow light and a tentacle-laden chunky black cloud. Two seconds later the sound of the blast reached us. I looked down at my guy, “I was right it did hurt.” and laughed uproariously, “But not anymore.” He just looked up at me and tried to figure if I was crazy or what. Like he had any right to say anything about me.

The battle flashed back and forth and moved into the woods proper and then out of our view. We waited there for a while in the relative silence, the only sounds coming from a happy song-bird and the flashing, banging and popping of the Cat’s ammunition cooking off into the blue sky. I stared at the burning ‘Mech and thought how lucky whoever was piloting it was. He or she was relieved of the burden of the guilt and of pain. *Lucky bastard...* I slapped the guy who doubted me on the shoulder and said, “The *Atlas* is yours, and have stinky Fred over there help you too. He needs a bath of any kind. Oh, if there is anything left of the *Cat*, scoop it up too.”

The skirmish at the glade turned into a Capellan retrograde operation. Intelligence channels broadcasted that they, the Capellans, had been caught in the process of consolidating some of their weaker units and getting ready to make a major push elsewhere. Because of the confusion involved in consolidating units and reorganizing our forces were having great success in pushing them back towards their DropShips.

For me the salvage guy that meant a lot of work. By following the trail of destruction I had already salvaged a *Crusader* and that same *Huron Warrior* I had repaired earlier. It had gotten its guts blown out---again. I was starting to think that that ‘Mech was unlucky.

We weren’t actually salvaging we were just breaking hundreds of years of convention by stealing from the battlefield before the battle was completely decided by dragging the best salvage away before the final salvo. Of course we got shot at when we did it. Actually we got shot at a lot. Guess that is how those stains got all over my truck. Five kilometers behind us we dumped them for our maintenance chief to recover properly. My “trucks” were actually little more than short chassis ultra-heavy haulers with 200-ton Magna winches. We would literally roll up, loop cables onto legs or arms or torsos or heads and drug them away as fast as we could and tried not to get the crap blasted out of us.

I was getting pissed though. I still hadn’t found a ‘Mech worth taking for myself yet and “my unit” was down to five combat capable ‘Mechs and I was tired of working my ass off for this bunch of ingrates who looked like they were going to be relieved for reconsolidation and refit before I could get myself a ride.

Earlier in the afternoon my commander, who had actually surprised me by still being alive and in a working Mech showed up in the penetrated *Penetrator* and told me over his loud speakers to “hurry up and keep an eye out for Clan tech.”

“You think?” What about that broken AC2 over there? Should I take that too?”

“No, leave it.” And off he went.

More good sarcasm wasted. He stomped off actually believing I was going to hurry anything up and that I was as stupid as a lugbolt. Now if he had asked me to or implied that there was some kind of bonus or reward for it I woulda been haulin ass to keep up. But no! He had to go and tell me what to do.

I took a nap instead. Being passive aggressive is also one of my issues, but I'll save that for later. Anyway, as chance would have it when I woke up and rolled out I got lost because I forgot which way he had gone off. I followed the only tracks I could see.

The tracks I had found and followed disappeared down a wooded goat-trail that left me mashing the accelerator, breaking brush and struggling to see through the limbs and giant slapping leaves clogging my windshield and trying to choke off my engine. In a rare display of recklessness, yeah I know. But I'm the narrator. So there! I floored the accelerator and with a mighty roar pushed through the thick brush and scraped my way into circle of sunlight. Bloody beautiful sunlight too! Using the wipers to clear my screen as I rolled into the white rays I choked on my own spit.

In this island of sunlight were still smoldering fires, tents, cargo containers, a stack of full body bags and on the far side, kneeling and chained to a tree was---- my new 'Mech. It had to be. There could be no other explanation for it. I mean, c'mon an abandoned camp found by accident with a relatively intact BattleMech. It screamed bad-holo-vid feature or cheap novella or some other kind of cookie cutter bullshit piece of fiction. But never the less, it was there. Royal blue and silver shining in the sunlight.

I threw the rumbling truck into Parking Gear even though it was still moving; its innards made a raspy clanking sound as it fought its own inertia and jerked to a stop sending Smokey into the windshield to mash his face against the glass.

I told him to wear his seat belt...

I ran over to the 'Mech heedless of common sense or relative caution and started laughing and dancing like an idiot possessed. I pranced around it like it was an armored maypole, running my hands across every surface I could reach relishing its cold, sleek armor.

Rubbing a giant red knot on his forehead, Smokey came up behind me and yelled "What the hell is wrong with you!?"

"Hahahahahah!" I cackled, "There's notta damn thing wrong with me man! I mean look at it! Do you know what this is? Do ya?!"

"Yeah----it's a BattleMech. We've been looking at them all day." He said sullenly.

I wanted to stop giggling and dancing but I couldn't help myself. I cha-cha'ed from foot to foot and shook him by his shoulders. "Yes! By god you're right it is a 'Mech. You pudgy thing you. But it's not just any mech. That my blubbery, whiny friend is a *Hatamoto-Chi!*"

Smokey glared at me, "I'm not your friend and I say again---it's a 'Mech. A big stupid freegin 'Mech! Tie on to it so we can go." He looked around and sank his head in between his shoulders, "I don't like this place."

"Be a man for once will ya?" With his forehead shining like red sun and protruding about a centimeter further than it did ten minutes ago he stared at me like a mad basset hound all droopy and red eyed and snorted "No." So to irritate him even more I punched him in the shoulder playfully and said, "C'mon let's go look at it."

My breath grew faint in my chest as I slowed down and looked at it up close. The *Hatamoto-Chi* is one of the newest designs from the Combine. I had been at the range when they did field trials with it and it was nice. Really nice. It was an 80 tonner that moved like a 65 tonner and could really shoot move and communicate. This model had two PPCs and SRM 6's in its torso. When I was watching its trials live I had jokingly

asked my commander if I could have one too. He told me I could when, and I quote, “Hell freezes over.”

It took about 20 minutes to figure out what was wrong with the *Hatamoto* and why it was chained instead of standing. It had a blown optic relay block and had a few major electrical shorts. They, whoever they were, would have been able to figure it out if they had only been able to read old script Japanese and do level 3 work.

Damned straight I can!

I had Smokey help me make the repairs and all the while he whined, begging me to lash onto it and leave before we got captured. I ignored him and that was harder work than fixing the ‘Mech. He is quite persistent when he wants to be and has that kind of voice that sounds like its coming right out of his nose and drilling right into your brain.

I climbed into the cockpit and checked it for booby traps. There were two and I defeated them easily enough. Again whoever had this ‘Mech before was counting on getting it back because they didn’t spike any of the controls or take any circuit boards out. They just trapped it for your run-of-the-mill moron types. That just left me the task of bypassing all of the security protocols and cranking it up.

After 20 minutes of zeroing out control chips and disassembling and reassembling relays Smokey jammed his head in and scared the crap out of me yelling.

“Hey! I’m hungry dammit! You’re my boss, so feed me.”

“Shut up! You whiny thing you! Or I swear the first thing I’ll do when I start this hog is step on you!”

“Asshole.”

“Hugs and kisses back at you.”

He wouldn’t give it up. He stayed right outside the cockpit hatch and cried and moaned about his rumbling tummy and how his little toesies hurt and on and on and on. I ignored him as much as I could and put everything back together and smiled as Betty’s voice sounded off with “Reactor Online. Weapons Online...”

*Music to my ears.*

Grabbing the neurohelmet off the shelf above the command couch I sat it on my head and grimaced, anticipating a magnitude 5 migraine headache from being out of sync with the helmet. I wasn’t disappointed because as soon as I strapped it down I felt like someone had stuck a gun “inside” my head and pulled the trigger. Not really a big deal. Adjusting helmets is a simple thing once you’ve seen it done a dozen or so times.

I grabbed a salvaged cooling vest from behind my seat, took my rifle and rucksack and told Smokey to take the truck back to the closest rally point and wait for me. He sprinted for the truck without a goodbye and drove off the way we had come. I couldn’t help but wonder if he actually believed I was going to show up because if he did he is a lot stupider than I gave him credit for.

I also couldn’t help but wonder what was in store for me now. I mean I’m not religious, nor am I really predisposed to believe in karma. If I did I’d’ve killed myself out of an overwhelming fear of cosmic retribution. After all I am a killer.

But it here and now it does leave me feeling curious about the future and all. To find this ‘Mech in this place the way I did. There has got to be a reason.

Just has to be.

I hope it’s the good one...

I tromped off in the opposite direction I told Smokey to go in and made for the far side of the engagement area. I hoped I'd be able to find a hiring merc unit or at least somebody who didn't recognize this 'Mech and want it back or at the very least wasn't my old unit, although the idea of giving my former commander a one-way ride on a molten ejection seat did have a certain—appeal.

It wasn't long after the sun started dipping into its magentas and violets that I started seeing smoke on the horizon and triangles on my scanner. "Blue is friendly, right?" I asked myself.

"Yes." I answered back.

"Good." I throttled the *Hatamoto* up and moved out. The engagement area turned out to be fatal terrain in a big way. On a satellite view the area was an industrialized region that bordered a very wide river and delta region on the Capellan's west and south but the water's edge nearest the opening ran in a sort of saw-toothed pattern that projected seven or so large isthmuses and the next one down the line had the bridge they had needed to cross the river. It looked like someone made a bad turn and took their forces down the wrong road. To get away from this mess the Capellan forces were going to have to push the St. Ives force back inland, go down the next isthmus and run like hell for the river or they were going to stay put and fight to the death. But fatal terrain is inspirational. In it cowards become tigers. Now if it were me in charge of the St. Ives, which we all know it's not, I would leave the Capellans a way out and as they were trying to get away run them into the ground while they were thinking they had a chance of escaping.

Instead of being in charge and directing the battle I edged out of some woods on their collective east and paralleled both sides of the battle line to get a "feel" for the battle. During my approach I had to pop a couple of scout craft that were running sensor pickets for the area and then very slowly and carefully I slid into the Capellan eastern flank, not that I like them mind you, it's just that they were the blue triangles today and it's too hard to not get back-shot when you show up as one of the red guys.

The battle was actually pretty well matched on both sides and damned riveting to watch. Both sides were giving as well as they were getting. The Capellans had fought their retrograde into a long and narrow built up area full of two and three story heavy warehouses and industrial buildings. It was a nice place to defend. They had barricaded themselves with torn up slabs of ferrocete road top and sections of the riverbank floodwalls and to get close to them the St. Ives forces were forced into going down narrow streets and the Capellan's massed firepower.

What made it harder yet was the buildings themselves were long and closely spaced and made of reinforced concrete and steel. They were built to survive heavy flooding and other sea borne disasters. They couldn't be bulldozed out of the way or just plowed through like 'Mechs are famous for doing. Nope. Down the bottleneck it was. No cover for 'Mechs or dismounted infantry. Meaning that the attackers were going to have to spend lives to gain ground and the long avenues were veritable gauntlets of heavy fire. I could see some 'Mechs, a *Banshee*, an *Enforcer* and two *Firestarters* of the St. Ives, trying to batter and blast their way through one of the buildings as a way to avoid getting shot to pieces in the open spaces of the roads. But it was as hard as I thought it might be. Heavy lasers, battle fists and flamers labored to get a dent in the building's outer skin. One St. Ives unit had placed two of their assault 'Mechs, a *Zeus* and a *Mauler* side by side

and made them into a moving wall. Behind them a lance composed of mediums and heavies hid as the assaults pressed an advance down “their” street to the next intersection where they stepped aside to renew their own sniping attempts and general potshots at the heavily barricaded Capellans.

I took to one knee to keep my silhouette down and flipped through the Frequencies programmed into my console and listened to the audio parts of the battle. After about 13 or so channels I found something that sound “Interesting”.

“Scepter lead, this is Carrion 6.”

“Carrion 6 go---.”

“Scepter, we are outnumbered over here and are losing ground. We need support.”

Scepter’s voice returned cold enough to grow icicles. “Negative Carrion 6. I have nothing for you. Therefore you **will** hold. If you fall back further than your final protective line or retire from the field you will be in violation of your contract and forfeit all pay and allowances.”

“Carrion 6 huh? Well now it sounds like you’re kinda screwed over there and! And! That’s my kind of call sign.” I was pretty sure I had just found my own little slice of heaven and it was only a scant four kilometers away. I throttled my new ‘Mech up and sprinted down the battle line. Trying to dodge and duck incoming weapon fire while sprinting directly through its intended path is a waste of time. In reality if you’re committed to running through it all you can do is keep your eye on where you want to be, clench your butt cheeks real tight and go. Don’t look at anything, just go full tilt and pray. I did all of the above, with the exception of praying, and did okay for the first three rows of buildings, taking only a smattering of light laser hits and grazing autocannon fire but between building’s three and four I took a blast from some damned thing in mid-stride that tossed me forward onto my face and sent me skidding for at least 30 meters.

It is damned unsettling to find yourself hanging from your seat straps and only seeing ferrocrete and sparks in your cockpit screen.

I swear it took forever for me to stop sliding and gain my feet. I also swear the ferrocrete there was polished because it was like trying to stand up on ice. I fought the controls, reefing the sticks left and right and feathered the foot pedals to get the center of gravity established. I nearly had it when somebody on the other side got a line on me. Three times in succession I got to one knee I got pasted and dumped back onto my face, the ground slamming into me and making my ears ring and my teeth hurt. I was just about to give up on standing and start low crawling to cover when a couple of pilots moved in front of me and covered me with their *Panther* and *Javelin* so I could get to my feet again. Part of me thanked them for their willingness to place themselves in harm’s way for me. Another felt angry and another sad because they and I were still alive. I almost back shot both of them in anger. They had cheated me out of my prize. Bastards! But another more reasonable voice told me that I shouldn’t shoot them. After all they wanted to die in combat in battle with their enemies too. I shouldn’t be jealous because their wish is the same as mine. Then my grandfather shouted at me “*Yer too stupid and cowardly anyway!*” and my auntie chimed in, “*See I told you he was worthless. You’re a pathetic worthless slob Lem. And you always will be a pathetic worthless toilet bug of a boy-man!*”

I made a mental note to remember those two ‘Mechs and return the favor in kind should the opportunity arise. But I wouldn’t cheat them as they had cheated me though.

On my feet and on the run again I heard someone on the general frequency shout at me, me being my 'Mech, to identify itself and report for duty with such and such unit and bolster the line. I ignored them. I had an appointment already and my hurry was great. So great in fact I accidentally kicked an ambulance straight into the side of a building like a soccer ball where it shattered and spilled its occupants and fire onto the street. "Bad place to park." I said.

Carrion 6 turned out to be a merc lance comprised of a *Caesar*. Yeah. A *Caesar*! Not too many of those things around. Anyway, he and the rest of his 'Mechs, a *Firestarter*, *Kraken* and an *Uziel*. Damn! A *Kraken* and *Uziel* too! Is this the weirdo 'Mech parade down here or what?

Anyway, they were on the far end of the industrial park surrounded by burning Capellan tanks, wrecked SRM carriers and a butt-load of dead Power Armored infantry. The surviving St Ivers and they were trying to fend off an equal number of BattleMechs and some hard-hitting *Alcorn* tanks and a *Shreck* PPC carrier.

My newly adopted side of the industrial park had been built up by the defenders in anticipation of this battle by some seriously dedicated combat engineers. They had taken cut slabs of ferrocrete and stacked them up to form a big chicane that ran parallel to an enormous five-story warehouse and the river itself. Advancing units had to enter the chicane, travel down narrow channels as they zigged and zagged and come out the far end. With the chicanes acting as a canal the approaching St Ivers were weathering immense volumes of fire as they traversed narrow channels the sharp left and right literally using direct fire to dislodge the defenders and push them back or walk across their dead bodies. Then to make sure that nobody could go around the obstacle and flank them they had dropped a service bridge that would let them cross the river that made up the right hand/west side of the combat zone; they had also rigged up a foo-gas dispenser out of an underground sewage line and a oil storage tank. High velocity pumps sent oil and alcohol and kerosene into the line that was capped on its other end but had bleed holes drilled into its topside. This allowed the mixture to extrude out of the line to float to the surface where once the mixture was sat alight it would blaze like napalm as long as there was fuel to burn. This kept the entire river blazing with sticky wads of blue hot flames from bank to bank. So to get anywhere they were forced to take Carrion 6 head on or risk a heat shutdown in the middle of the burning river.

Carrion 6 and friends were nearing the end of their chicane when I arrived. I didn't say anything. I just walked past them and into the first sharp left cut channel and into a St. Ive's *Jagermech*. The *Jagermech*'s arms were raised already letting go with and blazing streams of AC2 rounds straight at me.

I know that this is going to sound stupid or just downright unbelievable but one of the things that make me so good is that the second I start a battle everything slows down around me. Let me explain: An AC2 sends a lot of rounds down the pipe, right? So many in fact that it looks like one continuous muzzle flash at the barrel end. Right? Well, when I came around that corner I could see every single flash of every round being shot. On top of that I could see the rounds themselves. Like little brown clouds shaped like closed umbrellas, pudgy and pointy. And all I had to do was pivot on my left foot and step between his arms and out of his firing arc and close in. I know it sounds like stopped time or some crudstunk like that but it didn't. I took hits. Quite a few actually but nowhere

near what I should have taken, but no matter. With only a minimal loss of armor I was inside his firing arc then nothing mattered. I just let go with a full salvos from my SRM Sixes mounted in my chest at him and shoulder crashed right into him knocking the 70 tonner into a stack of ferrocrete and pinning it there against the chicane wall, its arms flailing up and down wildly.

The smoke was still swirling off the *Jagermech's* chest when a voice sounded, "Duck!" Instinctively I let go of the *Jagermech*, lowered into a squat and looked into my compressed view for the new threat. In its compressed 360-degree view of the area surrounding me I could see that the *Caesar* had re-entered the chicane behind me with the *Firestarter* in tow and that they were weapons ready and a St Ives *Gallowglass* lining me up in its sights.

You know it is really neat just to watch your compressed view. I could see the flash from the *Caesar's* gauss rifle, hear it scream past my head and see it slam into the *Gallowglass* that was going to turn me into steaming chunky stew.

Dammit! Just missed me...

I turned my attention back to the now backpedaling *Jagermech*. The *Gallowglass* was going to have to wait. It had shaken off my tackle and missile attack and was sliding down the improvised wall to get me back into his firing arc.

With its arms up and ready to fire at me the *Jagermech* scraped against the stacked slabs of ferrocrete, edging back the way it had come. I checked my HUD and saw that my SRMs were cycling and out of play and my PPCs were too close to fire so I rammed it again. Shoulder first this time and center mass and full speed. Oh MY GOD! I felt and sounded like someone had used my head to ring a church bell and then dropped a ton of porcelain plates on me. Armor plating shattered and frameworks groaned as I hit his 70 tons with my 80.

My SRMs signaled ready as I shoved against the *Jagermech* and tried to hold it still for the next shot, trying to get my reticule zeroed in on the cockpit I was surprised when the little blue and white *Firestarter* that had come with the *Caesar* appeared at my side and rammed its bell-snouted flamer's barrel through the *Jagermech's* cockpit screen and fired. High pressure plasma blew into the opening and flames raced out the cracks and crevices like a leaky bucket and got all over the both of us and everything around us, spiking my heat gauge into the high yellow band.

A voice I recognized as Carrion 6 congratulated me on good timing, "But," he added, "you better be worth it because I used up my last gauss slug savin your ass."

"Tell you what", I replied, "if I live through this you can send me the bill for it."

"Yeah, I tell **you what**, if we both live through this I'm gonna charge you double."

"Deal. I'm going to go and kill something now. Are you coming?"

I walked ahead of the *Caesar* and left him and the *Firestarter* behind me. I could hear the whole lot of them swearing at me. Calling me a show off and an asshole but I could see them all in my compressed view following me up to the next corner. On my scanner I could see that there was an *Alcorn* tank and a *Dervish* and just past them at the edge of the next corner a *Gallowglass* waited. It was the *Gallowglass* that I wanted. I knew that if anybody was going to kill me it was going to be him. I wanted it to be him.

“Tell you what”, I offered over the mike, “if the *Uziel* and *Firestarter* and you can pin the *Dervish* and *Alcorn* down I’ll take the *Gallowglass* and keep it busy while you all finish those two off.”

“You got a death wish or something?” Someone asked.

I couldn’t help but smile and say with joy and conviction, “Yeah.”

I moved to the side and let the *Uziel* move to my right and one step behind and together we rounded the corner. The *Alcorn* fired and just like before I saw it coming and managed to pivot my left leg enough to get my torso turning the same direction as the incoming slug so instead of splattering my metallic entrails on the wall behind me it creased every plate of Starshield armor on my metallic belly and screeched like an enraged Banshee. I switched to my PPCs and fired both simultaneously at the offensive crawler. It shuddered and hopped as the man made lightning frazzled and jangled every circuit and nerve ending inside of it and my cockpit temperature spiked about 35 degrees in that same instant and made my next inhalation feel like hot exhaust gasses. But it worked well enough because I shoved the little *Dervish* out of my way and ran for the *Gallowglass* headlong.

Surprise!

The *Gallowglass* is a humanoid shaped 70 tonner equipped with jump jets an ER PPC and about five lasers. As I recall it’s two large, two medium and one small. I heard some were equipped with a gauss rifle but not this particular one. This guy had the PPC version and he let me know right off the bat. I took a shot right in the belly that made me forget my name and turned my entire torso yellow on my HUD. The only reason he didn’t kill me right there was because I was too close for a solid energy formation. If I had stayed to tangle with the tank and the *Dervish* he would have probably smoked me right down to my bootlaces. Damn!

Despite getting my watch wound tight I reached out to grapple with him but the slippery bastard hit his jump jets and hopped backwards and out of my reach but he didn’t get away scot-free. I sent a six-pack of SRMs his way and popped him across his legs in mid flight. The missiles swarmed after him and detonated in dirty orange puffs and shattered the armor plates on his legs, the pieces falling like rain to the ground below. I also took a quick poke at him with my right arm PPC and scored a hit on his right leg and quickly turned sideways to narrow my target profile. His turn was coming up quick. I knew this because I could see his arm mounted large lasers glowing and then coming at me. They looked like red lines being traced between us starting at his torso and ending past where my chest would have been if I had not moved. “Shit! Come on now!” I roared over the common channel. “You can do better than that. I know you can!” And to emphasize my point I hit him with another salvo of SRMs. As the missiles flew I berated him more. “What are you waiting for? You got a ton of lasers already! Use them you----priss!”

The *Gallowglas* squared up at me and in response to my insults fired all of its lasers. I saw them coming and despite my wish to die sidestepped a bit. Only half of the incoming beams hit home but my *Hatamoto*’s gyro wobbled in its carriage and screamed like a racing engine to keep me steady as more than four tons of armor flew off me and splashed into the air as fiery rain. That made me furious.

I had given him a perfect opportunity to kill me and he wasted it! Screaming at the top of my lungs “No god damn it!” I dashed forward and crossed the 100 meters between us ignoring his follow up shots and rammed into him just like I did the *Jagermech*. Alarms started flashing across my panels and Betty sounded off, “Armor breach detected, coolant loss detected, armor breach...” I hauled on my controls sticks and reached out with my battle fist and clubbed him upside his mechanical head, knocking one of its built-in antenna arrays off and bashing in the left side of the cockpit area. “Kill me damn you! Kill me! I bear clawed him with my right arm, hitting him in the shoulder and knocking him to the right even more. He responded by clubbing me in the head and firing at my face with the small laser built into his head assembly. The reflective coating on my transpex windscreen deflected the little green beam and my tongue lost a little hunk when I bit through it riding out his arm shot. I smiled and stepped back and let both of my SRM sixes loose. With less than 20 meters between us the blasts were instant and continuous and put Betty into fits as she reported the litany of new faults in my mech.

“That was just not GOOD ENOUGH! You—**weakling!!!!**” The *Gallowglass* fired its large lasers at me again but I saw them coming a week ago and moved aside and stepped forward again. “Forget it! You’re just not good enough.” I leaned back on my left foot and put my armored battle fist through the mirrored cockpit screen, flipped the safety off of my right PPC and discharged it into the savaged head assembly. Staring transfixed I could scarcely hear my hyperventilating. I could only see the smoke and sparks surrounding my imbedded metal plated fist and my grandfather’s voice telling me how much of a worthless little shit I was and how my mother was a whore...

## EPILOGUE

The Capellan Warrior House Hiritsu performed an expertly timed combat drop behind the St. Ives forces executing a perfect hammer and anvil maneuver. The battle was effectively lost as soon as the first drop pods landed behind the St. Ives forces. After that it was a rout with the St. Ives forces retreating in disarray and McCarron's Armored Cavalry pursuing them like the hounds of hell.

On the west side of the industrial park I met Carrion 6. He was a tall and lanky fellow with a nearly bald head and a handshake full of bulbous knuckles. The *Firestarter* driver turned out to be a fellow citizen of the Combine. Her name was Dessie Nichimura and her 'Mech was called "Lil Hotfoot". Another female pilot appeared. She looked tall enough to parachute off the side of a pfenning coin, coming up to my chest. She offered her hand and it disappeared in mine. "Wilma Mankiller" she said. Yeah I know. But I didn't have the gonads to say anything about that. She shook my hand and let her waist length gray and black hair loose and flow in the wind and went back to her battered Kraken. *Hmmm, anti-social type aren't you?* The last 'Mech to show up did so on flaming jump jets. Had to hand it to him or whoever it was, the guy had flair. Climbing down out of his scorched and paintless *Uziel*, Sigfried Hajari, as I came to later learn, gave me a half assed salute and said to Wilma Mankiller, "Hey there grandma. You had me worried. Thought you were gonna get your old ass killed."

She turned toward him and spit on his boots, "Junior; know this: I will dance on your grave..."

Carrion 6 laughed at them and turned to me. "My name is Major Thrash Truth and we're the Bonecrushers. Who do you represent?"

"Funny you should ask that Thrash. Because as of right now I don't have a home."

"Yeah, it's no wonder," Wilma yelled at me from her Kraken. "The way you just blunder head ass and shoulders into trouble begging for people to kill you." She tied her hip length hair into a quick ponytail and flipped over her shoulder before she finished. "You, young man, are fuckin nuts! And I don't want you either." Then she pointed at the Major. "Him though? He's got no standards."

I nodded and spit some blood on the ground. "So then," I asked the Major, "are you hiring?"

"I guess so. If the colonel ever shows up we'll make it official. But for now you can draw ammo with us."

"Sounds good to me. Anybody got anything to drink."

© 2004

Published by DropShip Command (DropShip Games, LLC) Nov 3 2004.  
[www.dropshipcommand.com](http://www.dropshipcommand.com)

BattleTech, MechWarrior, 'Mech, and other related  
terms are trademarks of WizKids, Inc.