

Marion's Misfits

"Hard Times and Harder Decisions" (Chp. 6)

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Troper Plains, West of Salsburg
Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyran Alliance Space)
21 Dec 3062
0600 Hours

The new morning sun was stretching its rays of warmth through the scattered treetops. The night's light frost had begun to evaporate and left a light fog that clung to the ground. To the common observer that fog extended far above the ground and covered most of the Troper Plains this morning. To Marion Morrison, commander of Marion's Misfits, the fog was a result of the dramatic battle taking place between his unit and the 15th Lyran Guard's Charlie Battalion.

The lead elements of the 15th Lyran Guard battalion halted their advance at roughly five hundred meters from the Misfits makeshift encampment. And for the better part of the past half hour seemed content to trade long-range fire with any mercenary that came within range. As the Misfits tried to maneuver to flanking positions, concentrated fire would reign them back in and the same thing when the Lyran's ventured too close. Neither side seemed ready or willing to commit to full-scale, in-your-face combat.

The patrols Morrison had stationed south of their rest stop had picked up the entire Lyran Battalion heading right for them in the pre-dawn hours. The early warning was enough to get his troops back into their 'Mechs and get powered up to keep from being overrun. Morrison wasn't sure if he was relieved or not that the first contact was made with 'Mechs from the 15th's Alpha Company. The mercenaries had defeated them over a week ago south of Lake Stinson but the new commander had his troops on a very short leash this time.

Morrison watched from the cockpit of his *Battlemaster* as a Gauss Rifle slug from a Lyran *Falconer* fell short of Major Tushio Sakai's *Raven*, digging a long furrow in the ground. "Command Lead to Recon Lead. Talk to me, what's going on?" he radioed to the *Raven*.

"I don't know Command Lead. The rest of the 15th is skirting my sensor range. Every time I move up to find them, I'm driven back. They don't want us to know something and I'm guessing it's big."

Morrison cursed silently and fired back at the *Falconer* with his PPC and missed. "Alright. Then hold back for now." He flipped the comms to the command channel. "I want everyone to pull back by lances. Leapfrog and cover fire. Let's sucker them in and try to keep from getting surrounded."

Morrison watched the men from Punisher Lance anchor themselves on the front lines to begin the organized withdraw. Captain Kevin Lendar traded shots with his *Warhammer* against an *Awesome* Assault-Class 'Mech. The severe range caused all the shots to miss but a Lyran *Gallowglas* tagged his right torso with its own ER PPC. Jules answered back with his *Caesar's* Gauss Rifle, missing the *Gallowglas* and striking a *Cyclops* moving in the backfield. Striker Lance had moved to the Misfits rear

already, their LRMs not having the desired effect at maximum range on the moving targets. Stalker Lance began to reverse their movements along side of Recon Lance, offering the lighter 'Mechs added protection incase the Lyran's rushed in. Morrison anchored behind Punisher Lance with Coleman's Slasher Lance ready to form the next front when Captain Lendar pulled his men back. Captain Jing Li had split her lance in half to cover the left and right flanks with their jump-capable 'Mechs.

While Hauptmann Harris engaged the Misfits with his Alpha Company, Hauptmann Gants was forming up Bravo Company behind him. He wanted to push hard against the mercenaries and decided some last minute organization would be key to solid victory. Or at the very least would get Kreiger off his back when he handed the mercenary leader's head to him. He began ordering his troops to move the slowest, heaviest 'Mechs to the frontline of their advance.

"Hauptmann why are you slowing down? I thought I gave the attack order." Gants didn't expect to hear from Kreiger so quickly. He must be monitoring the entire thing like a hawk.

"I understand that sir. I'm forming my troops for the attack now," Gants replied.

"Damn your formations Gants. Our vanguard has reported the mercenaries are trying to disengage and fall back. I want you to press forward. Attack now!" The electronic filters reduced the volume of his voice but certainly not the tone of it. Gants hated Kreiger's obsessive micromanagement. The mark of a good leader was that you could trust your troops to do their jobs.

"But sir –" He began but Kreiger overrode the channel and cut him off as if he knew Gants would protest again.

"I said ATTACK!"

Morrison keyed in the command channel. "Command Lead to Punisher Lead. Pull back on my mark. 3...2..." He didn't make it to the count of one.

"Oh my god, here they come!" screamed Captain Lendar over a wideband burst.

Morrison looked to his scanners and his eyes confirmed his worst fears. Ten 'Mechs initially showed on his screen, then a new pair showed up at the edge of detection range. Then three more, then another five. Erratic bands of blue lightning streaked between his 'Mechs. The 15th was rushing in for the kill.

"Form ranks!" Morrison called over the command channel. "Line up and reverse march. Concentrate fire on anyone stupid enough to get close!" Jules backpedaled his *Caesar* as Mike and Terry both lit their jump-jets and sailed their *Guillotine* and *Grasshopper* to land right next to Fujimowa's *Thor*. Kevin started to back up, firing his ER PPCs at the closest Lyran *War Dog* missing both shots. He stopped in mid-stride and turned around so he could run back to the new battle line.

Major Coleman saw the error in the *Warhammer's* move to turn in place. "Kevin what the *hell* are you doing? Get outta there!" he signaled.

By turning around Kevin exposed his vulnerable back armor to the Lyrans. A pair of *Centurions* from the 15th's Bravo Company were more than happy to accept the welcome target and both launched their LRMs while their right arms vomited fire and smoke from the LBX-10 cannons. The missiles homed in and devoured armor all along his right side and back. The scatter shot rounds sought and found holes left by the missiles. A burst of green mist exploded from the back of the *Warhammer* and coolant bled from the rents in the armor. The force of the attack knocked the big machine to its knees.

Coleman wasn't about to let one of his boys get butchered all alone. "Slasher Lead to Command. I'm going in to get my man!"

"Hold your position Slasher Lead and provide cover fire. They're just itching to pound us one at a time." Morrison brought up the channel for Captain Lendar. "C'mon Punisher Lead, they're almost on top of you. Get your ass moving!"

Mike was watching the entire scene unfold before him, knowing he was the only one that knew why Kevin was having so much difficulty. He tracked one of the fast moving *Centurions* and buried a shot from his Extended-Range Large Laser in its upper torso. The Lyran just kept coming. Suddenly a wave of fear washed over him. He felt torn between his duty to his commander and his duty to his friend. If they kept pulling back, Kevin would be killed. Mike knew that Kevin was in no condition for combat now and he had to do something. He dialed in the lance frequency just as he lit his jump jets.

"Cover me fellas, I'm goin' in to get him!" He screamed as the force of the thrusters pushed him further down into the command chair. All 70-tons of the *Grasshopper* sailed into the air on plumes of heated gas. Mike coaxed the 'Mech into landed between the advancing Lyrans and the *Warhammer* just getting to its feet. Mike targeted the same *Centurion* he'd hit earlier and tied a pair of Medium Lasers into the main trigger. He floated the crosshairs over the boxy torso and mashed the trigger when they burned a bright gold. The ruby and emerald beams cut swaths in the armor along the left and center torso. The 'Mech turned its attention to Mike ripping a burst from its LBX cannon. The scatter shot peppered the 'Mech all over, doing little more than scratching the paint. The other *Centurion* added in another LBX burst, catching the odd-shaped head of the *Grasshopper* with two rounds. The ringing in the cockpit made Mike wince. Before he could hit the same *Centurion* again, his missile launch klaxon began to blare as a *Cyclops* bearing markings of Alpha Company had now stepped up and was intent on making this Misfit an example.

The *Grasshopper's* anti-missile system roared to life and cut down a third of the incoming missiles. Mike road out the remaining impacts as they pockmarked the armor plating. The damage schematics switched to yellow and orange in some places as more LBX rounds rattled the 'Mech. Mike held his ground locking on to the same *Centurion* again. One Medium missed completely but the other hit the right arm while the ER Large Laser sliced the remaining armor from the center torso. The 50-ton Lyran 'Mech dipped wildly and collapsed in mid stride indicating that Mike's Large Laser must have damaged the gyroscope. He threw the 'Mech into reverse and began to walk backwards while the other standing *Centurion* kept pounding away with its LBX cannon. The missile launch warning blared again as the *Centurion* and *Cyclops* attacked with a flight of ten missiles each. Mike stepped to the left and twisted right breaking the targeting lock on some as the AMS system swatted a pair down as well. The remaining missiles battered his left side and arm knocking off armor plates and blackening the paint job. Mike had just steadied the 'Mech when a violent jolt rattled every inch of his body. The *Cyclops* had turned its Gauss Rifle against the mercenary 'Mech shattering armor plates off the center torso.

Mike glanced down at the damage schematic monitor and watched his center torso change from bright yellow to bright red. To make matters worse, the ready light on his ER Large Laser winked out.

“Oh, that can’t be good,” he muttered while wrestling the controls. “Why do I get the feeling this was a bad idea?”

Not wanting to close the distance with the *Cyclops*, Mike stomped down on the foot pedals activating the jump jets. He twisted in mid-flight to angle back towards his own troops. From the air he could see Kevin’s *Warhammer* walking through the Misfit’s front line heading for the rear area. He landed not far from Morrison’s position. His movement threw off the aim of the *Cyclops* as another slug rippled through the air in a silvery blur.

“Slasher Three, if you’d like to move I can probably hit that guy back, y’know?” Morrison said over a tightbeam to Mike.

Not wanting to be caught in the cross fire Mike hit the jets again, aiming to land behind the battle line. The combat and the strain of the fusion engine to meet the energy demand released a wave of heat through the cockpit of the *Grasshopper*. Nervous sweat flash-dried on Mike’s arms and legs; his lungs burned within his chest. The 'Mech started to lift off the ground and then pitched wildly backwards. Warnings blared in his ears as over half the protection of his right leg peeled away under the vicious assault from the *Cyclops*’ Gauss Rifle. His right rear torso was savaged by a full spread of LRMs, stripping that location bare of all armor and exposing the foamed titanium bones and myomer musculature beneath. With the flight path thrown askew the 'Mech lurched violently towards the ground. Mike abandoned all hope of controlling the fall and braced himself for impact. Riding 70-tons of metal to the ground from a standing position was bad enough. This was going to be worse.

The left shoulder hit first, followed by the right arm. Mike was slammed back and forth between the seat and the restraints as the 'Mech performed a rather ungraceful belly flop into the ground. Armor plates buckled and gave under the strain as the 'Mech ground to a halt only meters from Jules *Caesar*. The *Caesar* started to press forward to help Mike but was driven back by a hail of Gauss Rifle shots. Three *War Dogs*, two *Cyclops* and a *Falconer*, all from Alpha Company were protecting their kill and wanted revenge on the stomping the mercenaries gave them the last time they met. Jules and Terry returned fire along with Morrison and Fujimowa but the combined ferocity of the Lyrans was too much to hold position. A *Gallowglas* lashed out at the fallen *Grasshopper* with its ER PPC, the electric blue energy devouring the armor like a rabid dog. Morrison blinked away the spots in his eyes from the intense light and that’s when he saw it.

Stepping out from the massed metal machines before him in the classic parade colors of solid blue and white was a deadly 65-ton *Axman*. Clenched in its right hand was the namesake melee weapon it carried and it was heading right for Mike’s *Grasshopper*. Morrison dialed up the command channel again.

“Slasher Two and Four target the *Axman*. Punisher Three you’re gonna have to punch out. We can’t get to you without being overrun.”

Morrison looked out from his view port at the scene before him. Nearly two full companies of Lyran 'Mechs were crossing the grounds headed right at the Misfits. Alpha Company was running up the west side of the 15th’s line of advance. Bravo Company, down only a single 'Mech, was anchored in the center and pushing hard to close the distance for the assault 'Mechs in their ranks.

“Damn, it looks like they’re throwing everything at us.” He chanced a PPC shot at the *Gallowglas* catching it in the right hip.

“Command Lead this is Ambush Lead. They’ve thrown in the kitchen sink sir. I’ve got ‘Mechs, two lances from Charlie Company coming in hard from the left flank!” Morrison saw Ambush Three and Four rushing to the left flank to support the rest of their lancemates. Recon Lance moved with them in support. With Lyran ‘Mechs on three sides, Morrison knew it was only a matter of time before they completed their encirclement. Morrison cut in on the command channel, “Everyone slide right, let’s make a hole here people! Punch through their ‘Mechs and head for safety.” He hung on to the controls tightly as another nickel-ferrous slug from a *War Dog* crushed armor plates over his left leg. Missiles streaked overhead from behind him to bath his attacker in a massive fireball, but the Lyrans continued to press forward. Damage readouts from all his ‘Mechs were showing an even amount of punishment for everyone holding the line, but he knew they couldn’t hold out forever. There were just too many Lyran ‘Mechs and Morrison needed to get his people out to safety. Just then he realized that Mike Rior had yet to indicate he’d even received the order to eject.

“Punisher Three, do you copy? Dammit, punch out Mike!” he screamed over the comms. Slasher Two and Four, a *Marauder* and *Black Knight* respectively lashed out at the Lyran *Axman* only to hit screening ‘Mechs instead. The Lyran raised the right arm holding the hatchet up over the ‘Mech’s head and like a medieval executioner brought it down swiftly on the cockpit module of the prone *Grasshopper*, cleaving it in two pieces. Morrison glanced at his secondary monitors and the IFF transponder signal winked out for Punisher Three.

NO!! Morrison had no time to mourn the loss of Mike as missiles launched from a Lyran *Stalker* battered his ‘Mech. The cigar-shaped ‘Mech was well beyond the maximum range for his PPC, so he speared a *Centurion* that was closer sheering off its LBX-cannon arm. The arm cartwheeled away slamming into a *Catapult* that was moving into firing position. Just then a plan formed in his mind.

“Everyone listen up. Ambush and Recon wheel forward directly into their Charlie Company. Force them into Bravo Company then pull back at best speed to our right flank. Everyone else but Striker will drive directly between Bravo and Alpha concentrating on Bravo. Striker Lance you need to punch a very big hole in Alpha. That will be our exit. Hit hard and fast and then bug out at your best speed on my mark. Attack now!”

The fast ‘Mechs of Recon and Ambush Lance switched tactics and drove directly at the ‘Mechs in Charlie Company. The close quarters combat quickly unnerved the Lyran pilots who were trying to hit small, fast-moving targets without hitting their own people. Lasers and short-range missiles pummeled all ‘Mechs about the arms and torsos. The Lyrans began to backup to put some distance between them and their attackers and began to bring themselves much closer to Bravo Company than originally planned.

The Misfit’s Command Lance of Morrison and Fujimowa, combined with Slasher Lance, concentrated their volleys against a *Falconer* and *War Dog* taking both ‘Mechs completely out of the fight in short order. Stalker Lance and the remnants of Punisher both reduced the Lyran *Stalker* to a walking junk heap that now lay unmoving on the ground. Fujimowa and Morrison both teamed up against an *Awesome* while Slasher beat down an *Orion* and a *Vulcan* in quick succession. Morrison saw some of the Bravo Company ‘Mechs turn towards their right side as Ambush and Recon drove Charlie Company closer to the main thrust. They paid dearly for their inattentiveness as Stalker Lance drove hard at them. A *Centurion* was dumped unceremoniously on his rear end and a *Catapult* was downed with only one leg still attached courtesy of Sergeant Lorus’ *Hunchback*.

Striker Lance sent a full volley of LRMs at the *Axman* that decapitated Mike’s *Grasshopper* and then turned on a pair of *War Dogs* that moved up to the front of the pack lashing out with their lasers.

The *Shootist* and *Avatar* combined on one while the *Archer* and *Bombardier* took the other. Neither Lyran survived lasted long enough to regret their move as both ejected before the 'Mechs were lost to gyro failures. Striker Lance then split to each take on individual targets. Vlad shouldered his *Shootist* into a *Gallowglas* knocking it flat before lasing off its left arm to keep it down. Sarah's piloted her *Archer* in the manner of her inspiration, Morgan Kell, launching wave after wave of missiles heat be damned. The Lyrans Alpha Company reformed to blunt their advance.

Russell's *Avatar* slashed at the only other Lyran *Awesome* with paired Medium Lasers and Medium Pulse Lasers carving ugly scares all over the boxy torso. He danced sideways to avoid the return PPC fire while his heat lowered then hit the *Awesome* with paired 10-tube LRM racks. The Lyran backed away and twisted left scoring with one of three PPCs. Russell knew the standard firing patterns for an *Awesome*'s three PPCs was 3-3-2 to avoid heat-induced shutdown. He drove straight at the Assault-class 'Mech firing both Pulse Lasers as he moved in. The needles of green energy nibbled away the right torso armor and left myomer muscles and titanium supports showing. Russell cut right and aimed his right-arm mounted LBX at the Lyran and ripped a cascading cluster round across the enemy 'Mech. Several fragments found the open wound on the right chest and shattered the PPC mounted there. The energy coils flashed as the weapon discharged back into the chest cavity shredding the heart of the 'Mech. Like a marionette cut from its strings the Lyran 'Mech slammed face first into the dirt. A *Trebuchet* took the fallen *Awesome*'s place launching two flights of SRMs at Russell. The *Avatar* shook off the attack with little notice and cut into the left torso with its Medium Lasers and Pulse Lasers. Like a surgeons knife the lasers melted away all the armor protection the 'Mech had on that flank and struck savagely at the internal stores of missile reloads. Despite the constant combat there were enough missiles left in the 'Mech to destroy the entire left side. He had succeeded in creating a hole in the middle of the 15th's Alpha Company. He turned back to his left and grinned in wild satisfaction as he engaged a Lyran *Cyclops* closing in on him.

Morrison was watching the screens as best he could while tangling at long range with a *Berserker* Assault 'Mech. Each 'Mech only had a PPC that could range that far and Morrison had no desire to close with another axe-wielding 'Mech. As soon as he saw Striker punch through their Alpha Company he made the call. "Ambush and Recon break off and drive behind us! Punisher head out." He quickly transferred over to the company-commanders channel. "Stalker, drive in front of us and through their positions. Slasher take rearguard for Ambush and Recon. Command Lance will follow with Slasher out the hole."

Ambush Lance used their jets for speed and Recon was already cutting loose from their free-for-all and moved away to cut behind everyone and out the hole in Alpha Company. Over the distance Morrison could see the heavy price the light 'Mechs paid for their up close and personal fight with Charlie Company. Stalker Lance cut right through the Lyran's line taking back shots and near pointblank shots at any Lyran in the way. Stephanie's *Wraith* slashed a *Maelstrom* across the legs and then begun to rise on fiery plumes to jet over the melee. She was barely a thirty meters off the ground when the 'Mech suddenly spun wildly out of control and armor showered the field like a summer rainstorm. Her 'Mech slammed back down on its back as forty LRMs devoured armor all over it and it ceased moving. Stalking through the smoke and fire came a sight that sent chills down Morrison's spin. The new 'Mech's saucer-like body was hunched over a set of backward canted legs. Arms mounted from underneath the frame sprouted a single-tubed weapon and missiles racks could be seen on the top of the body as well. The computer quickly identified this new 'Mech as a member of the 15th Lyran Guard and tagged it as a *Turkina* Assault-class Clan OmniMech, Variant A.

Not seen since the Clan Wars, the OmniMech had given Morrison initial pause. He snapped out of his state of shock and realized it was now or never. "I want everyone to make best speed for your exit vector but try to get the most damaged 'Mechs out first so that they'll make it. Everyone go now!"

As if he knew his prey was escaping the *Turkina* launched itself into the air and headed right for Morrison. Fujimowa saw it before Morrison and snapped a shot with his PPC at the Lyran 'Mech. The armor loss and blackening seemed to have no effect but Fujimowa fired again adding his second to last reload of LRMs. The Clan 'Mech fired both Gauss Rifles together and caught Morrison's *Battlemaster* in the chest and right torso. The kinetic energy spun the 'Mech around and Morrison was able to catch his fall with his arms but mangled the barrel of his PPC in the process.

Kreiger! "Finally decided to stop hiding behind your men, eh Kreiger?" Morrison taunted over the open comms as he worked back to his feet.

Fujimowa positioned himself between Morrison and Kreiger. "Morrison-san, I will cover you but you must go now," he radioed. The thundering clap of the Thor's autocannon echoed inside the Battlemaster cockpit. Coleman also saw the Clan 'Mech moving and sanded off more armor with his own LBX cannon but nothing was deterring the Lyran 'Mech. *They really mean to kill us all!*, thought Coleman. Then suddenly a very disturbing thought occurred to him. He couldn't save his own men any more the Morrison could right now. And that little fact brought everything he hated about Morrison into perspective in one fell swoop.

"I'm such an idiot!" He almost smacked himself in the head but stopped before the 'Mech could mimic his movements. He centered both crosshairs over the Clan 'Mech and let fly with everything in his Orion's arsenal. The wave of heat from the laser, missiles and autocannon attempted to bake him in the cockpit as he lumbered his 'Mech into a jog aimed right at Kreiger.

He flipped to the Misfit's open comms. "Get your people outta here Morrison, I'll deal with our new friend."

"Don't you mean 'our' people Coleman? That includes you too!" Morrison called back.

"Not anymore Morrison. It's time for me to move on and I might as well pull your butt outta the fire in the process. I'm sorry for all the crap I put your through. It was never about you, just my problem with accepting you."

The *Turkina* shrugged off the attack and moved to angle away from the *Orion* and continue firing on Morrison.

"Cut the crap Coleman. We can both get out of this." Fujimowa blocked Morrison's 'Mech from a clear shot with Kreiger and vice versa as he herded the Misfits leader towards the escape vector.

"No, we won't. Get your men out. I'll buy you some time. I'm switching my scanners and ROM to transmit so you'll have something to remember me by when I'm gone. Good luck Colonel." Coleman dialed up the open band and began to transmit while firing everything at the *Turkina* again. "I am Major Michael Coleman. Former Commander of the Juggernauts. Delta Company Commander, Marion's Misfits. Slayer of Liao and Marik troops and, "he paused for dramatic effect "I'm about to add Lyran Kommandant to my list." Coleman stitched a line down the right side of the *Turkina* with his LBX-10 autocannon and charged.

Morrison tried watching Coleman's fight with Kreiger with one eye and fending off the rest of Alpha Battalion with the other. His PPC mangled and severe armor breaches all over was making it all but impossible to fight back against the remaining Lyran 'Mechs in front and behind his fleeing troops. Keeping pace with him the whole way was Fujimowa and they were the last two to leave the field. The *Thor* shouldered aside a neutered *Axman* and was caught directly in the cross fire of a *War Dog* and *Falconer*. The mercenary 'Mech spun once and then slammed into the ground. Morrison had no chance to escape being hit by either 'Mech or any real chance of putting one down before the other put him down. Throwing caution to the wind he mashed his main trigger as the targeting computer locked on to the squat *Falconer*. Normally the 'Mech would have a difficult enough profile to hit but Morrison knew he only had one shot at this. All four Medium Lasers hit the right arm of the Lyran 'Mech boiling away armor plating and torching myomer muscles. With the armor gone the beams continued to eat away at the internal components the majority of which were the massive Gauss Rifle mounted there. The destruction of the rifle caused the magnetic accelerators to discharge prematurely and the feedback pulse surged back into the 'Mech and traveled directly into the neurohelmet of the pilot. He blacked out almost instantly from the shock of the pulse.

Morrison spun the 'Mech to try and hit the *War Dog* that surprisingly hadn't hit him yet. To his shock and amazement he didn't see the *War Dog* at first. What he did see was a Misfit *Bombardier* with both knees resting in the back of the *War Dog* now lying face down on the ground. His neurohelmet speakers piped in the cheerful voice of Sergeant Jeremy Volksfram, "See Colonel? I told ya I wouldn't let ya down!" Morrison smiled as he watched Fujimowa leverage his 'Mech back to its feet. "Right then," Morrison said over the open comms "all commands head back to base." He changed his comm gear over to a secured channel. "Hound Roost this is Command One. Requesting Pack Hunters on escort and CAP. Grid Tango-five-one-six-niner-seven-four-Alpha. This is a burst." He keyed to repeat the message three times and hit the transmit button to send the message over the satellite communication net managed by Gyro-Tech.

Kreiger stopped his 'Mech and turned to face the charging *Orion*. White smoke billowed from the top of the Clan 'Mech as forty missiles raced towards their target. Coleman returned fire from the launcher that replaced his 'Mech's left hand. At the last possible second Coleman juked left and half the LRMs narrowly missed him. Without checking the status of his own missiles, he twisted right and brought arm mounted Medium Lasers and a torso mounted LBX-10 autocannon to bear. The gait of the lumbering 'Mech skewed most of the autocannon aiming mechanisms but the lasers burned black scars across both legs of the *Turkina*. The 95-ton 'Mech proved to be made of sterner stuff and it weathered the attack and ripped the air with paired Gauss slugs. Damage taken early in the battle had weakened armor all over the *Orion* such that one slug pierced the center torso and smashed a Narc beacon launcher into waste scrap. The other slug hit the right leg just as it was coming back down. The kinetic force nearly knocked it out from under the 'Mech causing it to stumble. Coleman wrenched the controls and successfully fought gravity's grasp. He re-centered his path onto the *Turkina* and pushed the throttle to the physical stops. *This ends now!*

As the speed of the *Orion* reached the maximum velocity everything else around it became a blur to Coleman. His vision effectively tunneled on the one target he had to destroy. Other Lyran 'Mechs tried hitting the *Orion* but many of their shots simply failed to connect. Kreiger began to back up and fired the rifles as fast as they would load. Coleman noticed three distinct hits right before he lost half of his heatsinks. Less than one hundred meters from his target he let fly with everything again. LRMs failed to arm in the short distance but still battered the 'Mech with force and unspent rocket fuel. The close range keep the LBX rounds from scattering and nearly all the fragments punched the center torso while the paired Medium Lasers and SRMs unleashed a hell-like fury. Without the heatsinks to dissipate the heat from weapons fire the 'Mech quickly succumbed to a critical overload. The circuitry melted behind the

control panels, the wires instantly frying and severing their connections. For a brief second Coleman had thought to grab the ejection rings and punch out but with all the controls of the 'Mech effectively burnt out there was no escape. Not even knowing if his voice would be heard, Major Michael Coleman yelled out one last time through the smoke and fire that began to devour the cockpit, "HA HA! Die you Lyran bastard! DIE!!"

The *Orion* had begun to slouch from the heat and actually tackled instead of ramming the *Turkina*. The 'Mechs locked arms as they somersaulted over top of each other. Armor and weapon pods were ripped free from the tremendous strain and internal ammunition cooked off and exploded taking other dormant munitions with it. The fireball inside the *Orion* blossomed with an intense brilliance as the fusion heart of the 'Mech detonated. The explosion flung pieces of both 'Mechs across the field stopping the flow of combat between the groups almost immediately. 'Mechs of the 15th Lyran Guard stopped in their tracks and turned to see if their illustrious leader was truly slain in the suicide attack.

As the smoke cleared revealing blackened scraps of once proud 'Mechs the Lyrans that were still standing began to turn in pursuit of the Misfits. Cries of rage and anger spilled over the comm net.

"All Lyran Guard units stand down!" came a strong tone of voice. The 'Mechs slowed to a stop and turned back to the crater that held the *Turkina*'s smoking remains.

"Who is this?" challenged one of the Lyran troops.

"This is Brevet-Kommandant Gants. I am in command and I am ordering EVERYONE to stand down. Charlie Company, form a skirmish line in case of a counterattack. I want everyone else on repair and recovery. Get our downed men out and get them medical attention now. Move it people." Gants wiped his sweaty hands off on the ballistic cloth of the coolant vest. Even though the heat levels had subsided to normal levels he could feel every inch of his skin was wet and clammy. He flipped the switch and raised the spaceport command center over the radio. Cutting off their opening response he ordered all technicians and medical teams into the Overlord-class *Stahlhammer* and directed them to the immediate vicinity for recovery, repair and medical evacuation of the wounded. Once the call was finished he marched his *Berserker* over to where Kommandant Kreiger last stood, before the mercenary *Orion* obliterated them in what Gants would never openly admit to was a glorious ending for a warrior.

Using the hatchet mounted to the right arm he carefully tried to sift through the larger parts of the debris field. Using the external mics to detect any human sound he pushed components that were so charred and mangled that he couldn't even tell what they used to be. He moved over something he mentally remarked as more artwork than machine and uncovered a dome shaped object beneath it. Moving slower so not to cause any unnecessary harm to a would-be rescue attempt he nudged the object slightly. He froze as a soft moan echoed from the underside of the debris. Quickly he straightened up the 'Mech and took a hard look at what was in front of him. Then he audibly gasped which triggered the voice activated mic system. "By the Unfinished Book!" he exclaimed.

The reply startled him before he realized someone heard his exclamation. "What was that sir?"

Gants hit the company wide band. "Anyone not doing anything haul ass to my location. I think Kreiger is alive!" He hit the lockdown switch and flew out of the command chair to the egress hatch. Taking the chain ladders rungs two at a time he made it to the ground in less than fifteen seconds. Other men were running across the field and even a few 'Mechs were hustling over as Gants jumped down into the whole where the remains of the *Turkina* lay upside down. Gants slid down the slope and crashed into what he could figure was the nose of the 'Mech.

“Kreiger! Can you hear me? We’re going to get you out! Just hang on!” Gants flopped down on his back and shimmied underneath to the cockpit area. Once his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he was greeted by a ghastly site. Kreiger hung upside down by the command chair restraints, blood dripping from the fingers of his right hand. His coolant vest was shredded and leaking into a puddle forming in the fresh dirt. Over his entire body what wasn’t covered by blood was covered by dirt, which Gants was thankful for because Kreiger’s face appeared to have been torn apart in the blast. Gants stood up into the cavernous cockpit and placed his fingers over Kriegers carotid artery. Kreiger’s eye popped open just as Gants could feel a weak pulse and startled him. Kregier muttered something that sounded like “get me down” but under the strain of being upside down and likely the pain it was rather garbled. But Gants understood the look in his eye.

“Hang on sir help is on the way.” *Or I could let you die, and take your job and the glory for finishing off the mercenaries.* Gants pushed the thought from his mind as one of the medics pushed his way up into the cockpit area.

“Sir, I can take care of the Kommandant here. You’d better get topside.” The medic began the rummage through his knapsack for supplies.

“What’s the rush?” Gants asked suspiciously.

The medic replied without even looking back at Gants. “We’ve got a prisoner. One of them mercs.”

Troper Plains, West of Salsburg
Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyran Alliance Space)
21 Dec 3062
1700 Hours

Standing on the loading ramp to the *Stahlhammer*, Brevet-Kommandant Gants surveyed the scene before him. The Overlord-Class Dropship had touched down about a hundred and fifty meters from where the crater containing Kreiger’s ‘Mech stood. Kreiger had been med-evaced on a VTOL shortly after freeing him from shredded body of the *Turkina*. Gants had sent a squad of infantry along with as guards, just in case. Gants had his own agenda to see to, and didn’t need Kreiger getting in the way. Spread out like a sea of men and machines, were mobile ‘Mech repair bays erected to begin repairing the damage done during the morning’s battle. There weren’t enough supplies to repair all the ‘Mechs at the same time in the field, so the simplest cases were tackled first. This included reattaching limbs, replacing armor, and reloading ammo bins where possible. The worst cases, damaged gyros and breached fusion plants, were being prepped for transport back into the ‘Mech bay of the *Stahlhammer* and transported back to the spaceport where they could take advantage of a full ‘Mech hanger. Gants was proud at how the men moved swiftly under his command, even if it was only temporary.

Gants had ordered Charlie Company to reload first and then sent them off after the Misfits to shadow them back to their base. Once they had a fix on their repair and refit location Gants would order the final strike to end this game once and for all. Then while Kreiger was healing from his wounds he would accept a promotion from a gracious Archon and then be in position to bring about some real career making changes. But first he needed to report all of this to the Lyran High Command. *You can’t come out on top if you don’t bury someone at the bottom first.* Gants strolled back up the ramp into the cavernous bay as he headed to the elevator.

“Kommandant Gants! A moment sir.” A voice called from behind him and echoed off the walls. Gants turned around in place and spotted his second-in-command approaching with three heavily armed guards behind him. Sandwiched between the guards was a rather dirty looking prisoner shackled at the wrists and ankles. Gants returned the salute to his second and stared directly at the mercenary before him. Grass and dirt were ground into the gray prisoner jumpsuit at the knees and elbows. A few bruises and cuts were all that shown from the battle earlier. *So much the better to avoid unnecessary medical treatment*, thought Gants.

“I trust that we won’t have any problems from you, during your stay with us?” Gants asked rhetorically. “I want you to know that I will treat you with the same respect that you give to my troops. Obey them, and you’ll have it easy. Cause me any problems and I’ll be sure to look the other way as I grind you with my Mech’s heel. Understood? Good.” Gants stepped forward and brushed the medium length red hair away from a pair of green eyes. Her cheeks flushed red as Gants grabbed her by the chin and slowly took stock of her features. None too gently he released her to the waiting arms of the guards. Gants turned to his second and tossed his head to signal to take the prisoner away.

Several minutes later, Gants was up in the control room of the DropShip composing a message to his highest-ranking commanding officer, General Nondi Steiner. Gants knew that the General was an aunt to the current Archon, and would certainly pass along this information to Archon-Princess Katrina Steiner. After all, it was in her best interests to appease the people of the Alliance while roosting on New Avalon, or so Gants had figured.

“We’re ready to transmit, *Herr Kommandant*.” Gants straightened the lines on his field jacket and cracked a large smile as the holorecorder light began to glow red.

At the same time that Gants was recording his message, Stephanie was half-dragged/half-pushed to the prisoner holding cells. The two guards held her up on her toes as they manhandled her down the hall and into the holding room. The room was a nine square meter box with only a single, solid metal door into the room. Stephanie caught a glimpse of another body huddled in the far corner before she was tossed into the room. “Enjoy your stay *Fraulien*. Don’t you two get all touchy-feely now, *ja*?” The guard laughed manically and walked out of the room and locked the door behind him. Stephanie brushed her hair from her face and turned to get a good look at her cellmate. A look of shock stretched across her face when she recognized his face as he nodded a silent hello. “You’re supposed to be dead!” she exclaimed.

Misfits Repair Base Indigo

Everywhere you turned people were rushing about. People were sandbagging missile and laser platforms alike. Tankers were loading up on extra fuel and expendables as fast as safety would allow them. Technicians hustled in and out of the repair bay with trailers loaded to the gills with spare parts and tools. Even Ed, the Misfits head tech was currently on the move. Having confiscated a hover-jeep from a now disgruntled Gyro-Tech employee, he was racing out over the ground to meet the incoming Misfit Mechs so that he could see and assess the damage himself. What he saw made him rather unsure if he was ready for all of this.

What little armor remaining on the Mechs was blackened, charred or just plain gone. In most cases limbs hung by limp myomer muscles strands and weapons were replaced by large gapping holes. Ed had started with two categories: immediate reload and immediate repair. After his first pass of the line he changed to three categories. Repairable, questionable, and off-line.

Ed picked up a headset he brought along with the field radio so he could drive the jeep without taking both hands off the wheel to talk to Morrison. He wasn't sure where to begin in the conversation so he figured just cut to the chase and be brief and to the point.

"Morrison this is Ed. Let everyone know that we've got five extra gantries setup along side the building to handle some of the extra workload. I've put everyone that I found can work a wrench to work and we're just waiting on your arrival."

Static burst over the headset as Ed strained to hear over the jeep engine, the wind and the clanking and pounding of 'Mech feet. "Understood Ed. How does it look from down there?"

"It doesn't look pretty from this view, " Ed sighed.

Morrison snapped back. "I didn't ask for a critic's opinion, I asked how it looks. How long until we're back up and running to fight?"

"Cut me some slack Morrison, I'm not going to know that until I get to crawl around in all the holes you've sucked up. Just bring everyone over and let us get to work and then I'll have some more news. Ed out." Ed threw the headset in the adjoining seat and gunned the engine to race ahead of the column heading right for the bays. It was not going to be a good day.

Two hours later Morrison had powered and locked down in one of the makeshift exterior gantries and descended to the ground from his *Battlemaster*. Ed stood near the corner at the front of the building going over reports that techs were bring to him with great haste. Each tech would run up with a diagnostic module that Ed would download into his noteputer, shake his head, and yell orders back to the tech while handing the module back then tech would run back to the bay where they were assigned to work. Seeing the visible frustration etched across Ed's face, Morrison wasn't sure he wanted to hear what he needed to know.

"Dare I ask," Morrison said quietly as he walked over. Ed took a dirty grease rag from his back pocket, wiped his forehead and stuffed it back into the pocket. Ed looked right at Morrison and cracked a wry grin. "Do you want it sugar-coated, or right between the eyes?" Morrison just shrugged and hung his head slightly.

"We're down three 'Mechs. Two heavies from Delta Company and a medium from Baker. That's the tally for complete losses." Morrison stopped himself from asking if complete included loss of pilot. "Losses resulting from combined damage aren't any better. Five 'Mechs aren't going back into combat for quite some time. They include the *Bushwacker*, *Marauder*, *Guillotine*, *Shadowhawk*, and your *Battlemaster*. Unless we find a decent supply of replacement armor Ambush and Recon Lances wouldn't survive a heavy rainstorm. Missile reloads aren't horrible but they could be better so Striker Lance needs to go easy or go empty. The rest are just a jumble of reload, repair and rearm. Eleven 'Mechs out of twenty-six I can give back to you in enough condition to fight but I can't say how well."

While Ed read the butcher's bill off, Morrison had crossed his arms and clenched his jaw as the report got worse and worse. Most of the report he had known but had secretly hoped it wasn't going be that bad. So much for hope. "I guess it's too late to get it sugar-coated?"

Ed looked blankly, "That *was* sugar coated."

Morrison sighed, "I see. So my ride is out for now huh?"

"Yeah, I figured you'd say that so I have my assistant pulling boards on the *Penetrator* now to swap in your boards. Give him half hour to make the swap and then another forty minutes or so to make sure the new boards read and you're able to pilot the blasted thing. Just promise me that you'll bring it back looking better than this thing." Ed jerked his thumb over at the beat-up, thrashed *Battlemaster*.

"Yeah, sure," Morrison said. "Ok, here's the game plan. Pull the pilots from the 'Mechs not going back out and put them to work repairing. Take anything you need from those 'Mechs to put the others back online. For everything else, beg, borrow, steal whatever you need. My signature goes out on anything we need and we need to hurry. I don't think the Lyrans are going to wait with all this fresh blood in the water. I've got to get over to TacOps and get Charlie Company deployed to discourage the shadow we picked up on the way here. Report any changes to me as soon as you get them."

Ed nodded and head off into the bay to get the job done and Morrison headed off for the Command tent to coordinate his defenses. He still had a unit to run and protect with whatever he could lay his hands on. "Man, this place sucks" he muttered.

Gyro-Tech Industries, Strona

In the midst of the battle another enemy of the mercenaries was forming another plan to get back at the mercenaries. First he had to get himself out of the very large predicament he'd gotten into by dealing with Peter Clemenza. Clemenza had blackmailed his way into getting shipments of 'Mech gyroscopes to sell on the black market. Now with Clemenza dead and the Lyran troops pressing the mercenaries hard, he had to move any incriminating evidence to point to someone else. And Batt Cooper, CFO of Gyro-Tech had the perfect patsy to pin the crime on.

Working from another terminal in the corporate office, Batt inserted a optical disk into the external drive and powered up the system. Halfway through the boot process he hit a special three-key combination that loaded the program on the disk into the terminals memory so that no keystrokes could be recorded by the operating system. At the login screen, Batt used information gathered by a sniffer program he'd been running on the network for months and logged in as John Kaufman. With Kaufman's high-level access, he had control over everything on the Gyro-Tech network. Running a hex-decoder built into the OS he ran a memory dump that gave him the access codes to the communication network and satellites owned by Gyro-Tech. A few moments of general hacking and soon Batt was looking at the main screen of the Gyro-Tech SatComm network.

He scrolled through a few menus and pulled up a log of recent transmissions. Nothing of interest showed up so he closed that window and went to active transmissions. It was here that his luck turned out and caught a field transmission over a designated military band. The message scrolled across his screen and Batt smiled cruelly. This was the break he needed. He leaned over, turned on the printer and hit the Print Screen key on the keyboard. The printer hummed to life and slowly spit out the information Batt requested.

```
Terminal JK04562:Node 121A
SatCommGHT21: Band 26A
08:24 GMT 21-Dec-3062
* Begin Transmission*
Hound Roost this is Command One.
Requesting Pack Hunters on escort and CAP.
Grid Tango-five-one-six-niner-seven-four-Alpha.
```

This is a burst.

End Transmission

Batt leaned back in the chair and read the sheet over and over while a plan formed in his head on how to pin all this on John.

Meanwhile, down in the main server room John Kaufman, Peter Baker and a pair of technicians were also hacking the network. But they weren't looking for classified documents. They were instead looking for particular network traffic coming from the SatComm network and going to terminals in the building. Once they found those particular network packets they could dissect them to find the terminal that was pulling them in. Peter and John stepped back from the techs working hard at the terminals because they simply didn't have the training to not be in their way. Let those that know do the job, John had said to Peter. It wasn't long before they picked up on what they were looking for. By filtering out all the network noise except the few things they needed to see they quickly located what was going back and forth across the lines. It was just plain luck to catch the leak online at that moment.

Pulling in the network packets to a special network program they reassembled the packets into normal computer screens through the program to see what was going on. John and Peter both audibly gasped when the SatComm transmission showed up plain as day on the screen.

John grabbed the shoulder of the one technician, "Find the terminal that's getting that information! Find it now!" The technician feverishly punched the keys trying to get the information they needed to find the intruder. "Don't worry Mr Kaufman, as long as he stays online we'll nail him in a few seconds." A few tense moments passed with only the clacking sound of the keys. John paced back and forth only stopping when one of the techs shot him an annoyed look over his shoulder. Realizing he could do no more here than occupy space he walked over to the phone and dialed the security post.

"Anderson, security."

"This is John Kaufman. Go to full alert. We have an intruder."

On the top floor Batt had just placed the print out into a folder and got up from the chair and turned out the lights of the office. He opened the door slowly and listened out in the hallway. An unfamiliar hum permeated the air. He turned back around and saw the power lights on the terminal and realized the hum was the still running terminal. He walked back to the unit, ejected the optical disk and casually flipped the power switch. He closed the office door behind him and headed for the elevators. This was easier than it should have been, he thought.

The second tech let out a whoop and ran over to the main patch board. He fumbled over some wires and traced a single wire across the board. "Got 'em! He signed off but I still got him!" he exclaimed and rushed back to the terminal he was working on.

John put the phone on speaker and put the handset back. "Standby for intruder location."

The tech checked and double-checked his findings and a confused look came over him. He darted back to the patch panel and again back to the terminal. "This can't be right..." he muttered. The other tech looked over at the screen and nearly fell back in his chair and began pulling up data on his own terminal screen.

John was becoming flustered. "Well do you have him or not, dammit?"

The tech that first said he'd found him looked up at John. "I wanted to make sure this was right because it really didn't seem possible. He's on node 121A at the corporate level. He's patched into terminal JK04562."

"But ... that's my terminal..." John's emotions shifted between shock and anger. "This is John Kaufman. All security forces converge on the corporate level, my office! Move now!!" John and Peter both dashed out the room and headed for the express elevator. Thirty-five stories above them was someone they really needed to get to quickly.

Batt hummed to himself as the elevator numbers counted upward. The car still had three floors to go when the express elevator at the end of the hall dinged and the doors opened. Six fully armed guards rushed out and headed for Kaufman's office around the corner. Two made the turn when the third guard in line spotted Batt standing before the other bank of elevators. The doors before Batt opened and he darted inside before the guard could get a shot off but not before he shouted and brought the rest of the team running. Batt pressed the buttons to close the doors and head for the lobby. Just as the guard reached the doors they closed and the car began its decent.

"Damn!" Screamed the head guard. He grabbed the radio unit attached to his suits shoulder straps. "Security Team One to all teams. Suspect is in elevator five, descending. All teams converge on the lobby." He turned and ran for the stairs. "And somebody lock down the damn elevators!"

Batt Cooper was beginning to realize that today was not going to be as easy as he'd hoped. He knew that they security teams were looking for someone, even if they didn't know it was him specifically it wouldn't be long before someone got a good look at him. His only hope was to escape the building and get a decent alibi to buy him sometime to get off planet. He looked over at the panel with all the floor numbers. Quickly he punched for floor three figuring they'd try to nab him in the lobby. He'd instead take the stairs and get out through the garage.

John and Peter had ridden the express up to the top floor and caught the security detail heading back down the many flights of stairs. Rather than be caught in the elevators during a lock down, they opted to run down over thirty flights of stairs. "At least its down and not up!" Peter had told John as they bounded down the stairs two at a time. They reached the lobby in just under five minutes, which was four minutes after the other teams converged on the lobby elevators. They ran out to see that elevator number five had stopped on the third floor, not the lobby as they'd hoped. Both John and Peter were out of breath whereas the security detail looked as if they'd not even come close to breaking a sweat.

The head of security seized the momentum of the moment and kept his teams moving. "Team three, third floor. Team two, second floor. Team four, garage. Team one will hold here. Runabouts converge on garage exits in case this guy goes to ground." The security details moved about checking and covering exits with precision and professionalism.

Batt had gotten off the elevator at the third floor right before they'd locked down all the elevators. That was fine by him since he needed to get out and not go back up anyway. He ran for the fire escape and took that all the way down to the garage level where his luxury sedan was parked. He exited the stairway cautiously, listening for sounds of movement or talking. His heart was racing and he was breathing very hard which made listening more difficult. Satisfied that he was alone on the level he bolted for his car. He punched in the keyless entry code and dove into the seat slamming the door behind him. Without caring if anyone heard him at this point, he started the car and shot out of the spot.

Automatic gunfire erupted behind him and sparks flew from the wall as he cut the corner and headed up the ramp. "Ha ha! They'll never catch me now!" he shouted and gunned the car faster up the ramp. The day bathed the exit in brilliant light as Batt shot out the door and into the empty street still accelerating. His joy of freedom was short lived however. Just a hundred meters away from the exit sat an APC with two rather stern looking troops both holding man-portable short-range missile launchers. If that wasn't enough deterrent the APC's main gun was pointed directly at the car. At point-blank range it was highly unlikely they'd all miss. Batt slammed the brakes on the car and skid several feet to a stop.

"Turn off the car and get out," blared over the APC's external speakers. Right then Batt knew it was all over for him.