

BATTLECORPS

A LINE IN THE DUST

by Kevin Killiany

Harlech City, Outreach Chaos March 15 October 3067

The *Bushwacker* wasn't designed for urban warfare.

Dreyfus slowed the fifty-five ton 'Mech as he entered the cross street. The broad boulevards of Harlech weren't so bad, but in narrow alleys like this one he didn't have room to turn around. Low and broad, it was meant to fire at range on open ground. Clean combat, not creeping through back streets like a mugger.

And creep he must, at least in this service alley. He couldn't hurry with his wide-shouldered 'Mech scraping drain pipes off the walls as it was.

A glance at the chronometer assured him, again, that he had plenty of time to reach the designated rendezvous point at the southern edge of the DropShip field.

If an enemy came up behind him before he made the next throughfare he was toast.

Whoever the enemy might be.

Tough question. He wasn't even sure who their employer was. Someone generous with munitions and repairs and slots on the practice range who made very few demands. Until two hours ago.

Comm call in the middle of the night: *Get to your 'Mech; get it moving.*

They'd headed for the public hangars, him and Jerry and Mike and Anson. It was a longer haul for them than most. They lived outside the FreeHire Zone on a little "bunker park" in the southwest district due west of TempTown, just north of the South Sticks Mall. The municipale People Mover Express passed within a few blocks of their rooming house, but it went nowhere near where they needed to go. With no vehicle and no cabs at that time of night--or morning--they'd started out jogging east and south toward the hangars.

There were a half-dozen bunker parks scattered through Harlech, too inconsequential to be on most maps, planted over old style underground bunkers. The bunkers had been built as a last defense for a kind of war that had never come. Now they were massive

relics, gutted of useful materials and walled shut generations ago. It was impossible to build on top of the bunkers and all but impossible to dig them out. It made more sense economically to leave them in place than try to remove them. Harlech City planners had turned the useless ground above them into dumps, playgrounds, parking lots, or munipicle parks like theirs. As happens in big cities, these little parks became the town square of sorts for villages scattered through the urban landscape.

There weren't supposed to be any freelance mercs in the residential district, but the four of them hadn't fit in TempTown. Even before he'd hooked up with the others—part of why they'd hooked up—Dreyfus had known he wanted no part of the full-bore drinking, brawling, and whoring most freelancers seemed to think was required of them.

They'd been regarded with suspicion by the locals at first. Even finding lodging had been a victory, made possible by Jerry's easy charm and Anson's choirboy sincerity. But they'd gotten a foothold in the little urban village surrounding the bunker park, a three-room apartment on the top floor of the Henderson's narrow rooming house. Over the last six months they'd made their way from warily tolerated interlopers to accepted, even welcomed, neighbors.

Dreyfus found that very satisfying.

A ping. It didn't linger. Some active scanner had touched his *Bushwacker* and moved on, either not registering his presence or not caring.

The four of them had been getting to know each other even as the neighborhood was getting to know them. They had hooked up just weeks before when they'd accepted there wasn't much chance of four solos with uncertain pedigrees being hired on by one of the better outfits. And that's what they wanted. None of the fly-by-night, do-whatever-you're-paid-for gigs most freelancers seemed to relish. They wanted to do work they could be proud of.

They figured the best way to get hired by a good mercenary command, the type they wanted to work for, was to form a lance of their own, then bid on sub-contract jobs—garrison relief or outrider defense—and do well enough to get offered long-term contracts.

Their mix of BattleMechs—all owned free and clear—had the potential for an effective and versatile medium lance. Well, me-

dium-light, given Anson's *Falcon Hawk*. It was the 1A variant, all standard lasers, which ran cooler than the PPC model. Jerry's venerable *Centurion* had the most wear on it, but he—like his father and grandfather before him—took good care of it. Mike's *Lineholder* wasn't glamorous, but with twin LRM 5s and five lasers packed enough fire power to earn respect. Built around his *Bushwacker*—

A scrape and squeal of metal told him the outboard flange of his autocannon had snagged and was pulling a fire escape from its anchor bolts. Muttering under his breath, Dreyfus paused and shuffled a meter left, then rotated his upper torso a few degrees right to release the twisted metal. Once past, he brought the torso back to centerline and resumed his careful stalk to the next wide street. This route had looked good on the cockpit map screen back at the hangar; now he wasn't so sure.

But no matter how well their 'Mechs complimented each other, four solos who'd never served together did not a good lance make. They needed practice, and they needed time to get used to each other and working together. Which was another reason they'd moved out of TempTown, away from evaluating eyes, to a residential district.

Living among the folks who labored to keep TempTown working—the waiters, the janitors, the cooks, and cab drivers—they did everything they could think of to form themselves into a team. They exercised together in the bunker park, with local kids and a few adults joining in for part of the calisthenics sessions. Their early-morning runs through the neighborhood had become a fixture in the local routine. Away from the public eye they discussed tactics based on what they each knew they could do, discussed contingencies for a variety of duties and disasters, and worked out codes so they could communicate even over open channels.

With their limited budget, live practice sessions on the free fire ranges were rare. And then energy weapons only, since they couldn't afford to replace cannon rounds or far more pricey missiles.

A lone figure ran across the alley ahead. Armed? Probably. But, according to the sensors not with anything to threaten a *Bushwacker*.

Just to be sure, Dreyfus paused, dangerously mid-block, and scanned the buildings on either side at minimum power, keeping his energy signature off any watcher's screen. Metal pings

of plumbing and frames; electric wiring hot traces of electrons. Warmth. The building on his right must be a hotel or something, so many people isolated in groups of two and four. Not a good hotel or there would have been a lot more fire escapes complicating his trip down the alley.

Satisfied, Dreyfus cut the active sensors and eased his *Bushwacker* forward.

Their lance had been hired as soon as they went public. Less than a week after their names went on the board—Dreyfus didn't know the exact date because he'd waited a week before checking—an employment offer, with pay voucher attached, had arrived in their box. Not the sort of job they'd expected, either; not even a job, technically. They'd been put on retainer. In addition to a living stipend—not excessive, but above scale—they had weekly slots on the live-fire practice fields, an account to replace the ammo they expended, maintenance provided through the general hangars, and free urban camo paint jobs for their 'Mechs.

Their new employer told them—through messengers—that all they had to do was get in shape, hang loose, and be ready to move on a minute's notice. Dreyfus had thought that last was figurative. Until the call.

Once hired they could have moved to paid barracks in TempTown, an option the four of them considered for perhaps a minute. They liked fitting in where they were and hadn't thought living so far from the hangars would be an issue. Maybe it wasn't. Tonight it had meant a mad scramble to get dressed and get moving. Less time than they needed to get where they had to be, time made shorter by Mike telling Lucy everything was all right and he'd be back as soon as he could. The Henderson's dog barking like a mad thing in the ground floor apartment.

But an hour and change ago, when he and Jerry and the others had crossed the line into TempTown, they found out that even with the extra ground to cover, they weren't the last to answer the call. A bus was still picking up stragglers. A bus running without lights and with armed men asking who they were; demanding proof before letting them aboard. A dozen other men and women were already scattered through the seats. Some with the stink of alcohol, or, worse, the sober-up purgatives. More than one had the glaze-eyed intensity of jump, as though a dose of stimulants could undo the ravages to their reflexes brought on by a night or weekend or week of binging.

The four of them had been talking quietly as they jogged, speculating on the mission, but aboard the bus they fell into the general silence.

Most of the others on that dark ride should not have been allowed to pilot ground cars, much less 'Mechs. Yet the bus was taking them to the general hangars. No concern but that they were who they said they were. Dreyfus bet it was no bet they all had the same boss.

At the next broad street, Dreyfus stopped before stepping his *Bushwacker* out into the relative open. He could see, dimly limed by the street lights, the forward planes of Jerry's *Centurion* also paused at the threshold of the open boulevard to his right.

No sign or sound of the other 'Mechs he knew were getting into position for the dawn attack.

Attack on what? Orders, objectives, would be given—they'd been told—once they were in position. Minutes before the attack began. But this was Harlech. This was, had been for Dreyfus for too many months, a neutral haven. Who was there to fight?

Dreyfus held position for another heartbeat, waiting for the rest of his lance. Nothing.

He clicked the comm to their private channel, pulling the gain down so the signal wouldn't travel more than a block or two.

"Where'd they go?"

"Anson went home," Jerry answered, his own signal damped to the point it sounded like it came from a hundred clicks instead of fifty meters. "Mike went with him."

Home. Back to the bunker park. Mike he could see. Mike would add it up the same as he had; figure out there was going to be a fight. He'd go back to protect his Lucy. But Anson?

Dreyfus kept an eye on his screens, scanning and rescanning. Nothing beyond the immediate buildings, of course; transmitted power kept to a minimum. The only way they'd spot an enemy was if the bogie walked right up on them. Or pinged them at range with his own targeting system.

Hell of a thing.

Their objective was north and west, the southern edge of the DropShip field. They were supposed to meet up with a company

of the Tiger Sharks. This made a sort of sense; the Tiger Sharks were fast-hit strikers, trained to raid, while his lance—according to the one and only ad he'd placed—was supposedly skilled at defending static positions.

His lance had actually practiced with elements of the Fifty-first Dark Panzers in the industrial section of the live-fire fields. Holding buildings the Panzers captured, denying them to the enemy if necessary. Collateral damage was not an issue.

They'd always hoped to be hired by an elite outfit like the Panzers, and the four of them had outdone themselves. Dreyfus thought their scores had to have been close to perfect, though their performance was never discussed, either by the Panzers or their mysterious employer.

Though tonight's comm call indicated they must have done something right.

Something right.

Tonight they had no orders beyond best speed to the designated point and await orders. But given their current go-to point, even without specific orders it didn't take a field marshal to figure out the industrial district exercises had been practice for taking the DropShip field's south cargo terminal.

And on Outreach, in Harlech, there could be only one enemy trying to stop them. Wolf's Dragoons owned this world. And right now it looked to Dreyfus as though someone was out to try and take it from them. Someone Dreyfus was working for.

But whoever it was couldn't be just using random lances. Dregs like the ones they'd seen on the bus and untried units like theirs. There had to be an organized force. Organized forces. Several. Like the Dark Panzers. And Waco. And others. Good units—well trained and equipped, that might have a fighting chance. The riffraff, the Warriors on the bus, his lance, they were expendable assets. A fistful of dust to throw in the eyes of the Dragoon juggernaut.

How long before the Dragoons realized what was happening? How long before they responded?

The map of Harlech was in his mind and on the screen as he stood too long in the opening of the alley.

The general hangars from which the patchwork forces were dispersing through the city were beyond the southeast corner of

the city. Even now mercenary units were advancing—had to be, though he only had his lance's orders—north along the shore of the lake and northwest across the upper corner of TempTown and through the working class neighborhoods of the southwest district. There were no forces below that line except maybe a few merc units that weren't in on the assault. And their 'Mechs were secured at the general hangars by Waco's forces.

But Outreach wasn't just mercs. There were people, families that lived here. This world, this city, was their home. The line of combat had to cut directly across the bunker park. And in all their practice sessions they'd been told collateral damage wasn't a consideration.

There was a legend—maybe it was true, no one ever agreed about that—about a leader whose followers faced a crisis in loyalty. In knowing what was the right thing to do. The leader, Dreyfus thought his name was Rubicon, had drawn a line in the dust and told his people: "Those who step across that line are with me. Those who don't are against me. Do what you think is right: one side or the other. Choose."

Dreyfus looked at the sky, greying toward silver in the east, then at the city street, empty in the predawn. Looked like it was going to be a good day. Looked like a good town.

"Let's go see what Anson and Mike are up to," he said quietly.

Turning left on the broad boulevard, Dreyfus made good time. The slender trees and shrubs of the median presented no obstacle, and he could have pushed his *Bushwacker* to its full eighty-six kilometers an hour, but he kept it down to sixty-four to let Jerry's older *Centurion* keep pace.

He wondered briefly what the Tiger Sharks would do when they didn't show up. Probably nothing; there wasn't going to be time.

He and Jerry passed one or two other 'Mechs, solos, moving dark and silent toward whatever destination they'd been assigned. Or whatever course they'd chosen on their own. Everybody was equally legit and equally covert in this predawn game of blind man's bluff.

The situation at the bunker park was about what he'd expected.

One of them, probably Anson with his smaller machine, had blasted away the brick and concrete sealing the south entrance to

the bunker. Knots of people, most carrying bundles, were moving from the buildings around the park toward the new entrance, picking their way over and around the piles of rubble.

God knew what they'd find inside, the place had been walled shut for generations. But whatever its condition, the inside of a Star League Defense Force bunker was going to be a lot safer than their cheap apartments when the shooting started.

And that "when" could be any second, now.

Dreyfus couldn't believe the Dragoons hadn't already responded to the merc forces moving through Harlech.

Without comment, Jerry stepped his *Centurion* carefully forward. The ragged line of people heading into the bunker in the predawn twilight wavered. Some ran. One or two dropped to the ground where they were, covering as best they could.

"Talk to them," Dreyfus said over the lance channel.

"Oh," Jerry said. "Right."

Using his external speakers, the *Centurion* pilot identified himself and warned everyone to stand back from the entrance. He used his 'Mech's only hand to do what the others couldn't, and cleared away the piles of blasted rubble. Using the feet of their 'Mechs, Dreyfus and Mike shoved the rubble into rough barricades. In the space of a few minutes, the people had a clear path to the entrance and the entrance had at least some protection against direct assault.

"How big is it in there?" Mike asked, his voice seeming to crackle from a great distance. They still had their comm units on minimum power. The four BattleMechs were standing with no sense of formation as their pilots watched the growing stream of people moving past their ankles. It was growing light enough for them to discern individuals.

Dreyfus wondered where they were all coming from. It was a cinch Anson and Mike had used their external speakers to warn the folks living in and around their boarding house. In fact, he'd bet Mike got out of his *Lineholder* to go fetch Lucy personally. But no one had been giving any warnings since he got here. Just people, families, couples, individuals, joining the queue leading into the bunker. *How many so far*, he wondered.

"Dunno," Dreyfus answered at last. "When they were built, a couple of dozen held all of Harlech. But Harlech was a lot smaller then."

"No light, no water," Mike said. "No heat, either."

"No air," Jerry added. "No ventilation means a lot of that is going to be stale."

"Damp, cold, dark, airless, and stacked four deep," Anson said. "They'll be safer in there than out here when the shooting starts."

As if his words had been a signal, flashes of light strobed above the rooftops to the northeast. The DropPort. A moment later rolling, staccato thunder confirmed the explosions.

The orderly lines of people around them became a surging mass.

"Stay in line," Dreyfus ordered over his external speakers. The outside microphones picked up the echo of his voice bouncing back off the brownstone buildings. "Everyone will make it. Don't dawdle but don't push. Help the next person. Keep moving, but keep it orderly."

To his surprise, the people responded. The surging mob sorted itself out into converging lines of people moving with a common purpose. Dreyfus made a mental note to add crowd control to their advertised list of skills.

"Anson, you've got the entrance," he said aloud over the lance channel. The smaller, more maneuverable machine was better suited for combat in the confines of the street. Plus its ammo-free laser loadout meant it could hang the longest if it came to that. "Everyone else, into the park."

Moments later the three larger 'Mechs were spaced evenly around the domed hill of the park, each covering one hundred and twenty degrees of the perimeter. Dreyfus placed himself facing north, directly opposite the open entrance, with Mike and Jerry positioned to cover it between them. Ideally, they should have been able to see each other for mutual fire support, but trees prevented that. He considered trying to level them, but trampling them flat would take hours and he couldn't spare the munitions to blast them. He decided their potential for cover outweighed the decreased visibility.

Now the question was whether the danger of showing up on other people's sensors was greater than the danger of standing around blind. Passive sensors would tell them if anything was right on top of them, but if they were going to want any advance warning they were going to have to go active. Which would immediately draw a big arrow pointing to the park for any hostiles.

Scanning the radio waves didn't help. Almost every channel except the ones they'd been assigned was jammed and what little traffic they could hear was in meaningless code. For all intents and purposes they were completely cut off from the world around them.

It was now full morning. Though the sun had yet to appear above the buildings to the east, the sky above them was blue. Flames were no longer visible in the daylight, but above the buildings along the northern horizon a dense cloud of oily black smoke spread like a cancer. There were no military targets Dreyfus could think of in that direction—that was a residential district.

Home to many Wolf's Dragoons families.

That thought decided him.

"Go active, people," he broadcast. "They're targeting civilians. We need to know what's out there."

No one mentioned that their lance had begun the operation as part of the mysterious "they." No need to. If they lived, they'd learn to live with it. Right now Dreyfus took some satisfaction from the fact that every cannon round and missile he was going to use against them had been paid for by whomever was responsible for... Whatever this was.

His screens lit up and almost immediately pinged heavy metal moving southeast to northwest.

"Heads, Mike."

"Got it."

One 'Mech, what read like a Blizzard APC, and a half dozen trucks were coming out of TempTown—no, from the south of TempTown—heading toward them at about ten kph. This made no sense until Dreyfus remembered their late night jog only a few hours before. The vehicles had to be escorting people on foot, infantry, toward the People Mover Express terminal just west of the park. If it had power, and if the hostiles held its control center, the PME would be the fastest way to move large infantry units to the heart of the city. But where had they been stashing large infantry units? He didn't know the particulars of every mercenary command on planet, of course, but still...

Overlaying the city map on his screen, he backtracked the oncoming force's path. Definitely not TempTown. Harlech Penitentiary. All

the hostiles needed to do was arm those inmates and turn them loose. How many hundreds of berserkers with no love for Wolf's Dragoons? Cannon fodder, but blinded by their blood rage they wouldn't realize that.

"Expect a lot of infantry with that metal," he warned.

"Want to rotate this way?" Mike asked. "Sounds like a job for your mini-guns."

"Roger that. Adjust perimeter to cover, I'm moving to meet," Dreyfus said, putting his 'Mech in motion. "Anson, look sharp."

"Always."

The targeting computer informed Dreyfus there was an eighty percent probability the approaching 'Mech was a T-series *Vulcan*: an older design, well adapted to city fighting but light on anti-'Mech weapons. It was a threat but outclassed by his *Bushwacker*. Whether it was 'Mech enough to defend the "infantry" it was escorting remained to be seen.

Or did it?

The question derailed his tactical planning, even as he continued to walk his 'Mech forward, stepping into the street bordering the park. Could the four of them stand against whatever forces were moving against Wolf's Dragoons? Particularly since, from everything they could see, the Dragoons had yet to strike back? He wanted to take on the hostiles, stop them in their tracks, turn them back. But was that possible?

He moved into the intersection. The *Vulcan* and the vehicles following it were a dozen blocks away, covering both sides of the boulevard. The forty-ton 'Mech stopped at the sight of the *Bushwacker*. The APC, trucks, and the mob of people Dreyfus could see behind them had no choice but to follow suit.

The *Vulcan* pilot transmitted a code phrase. One of the half dozen friendly identifiers on the list Dreyfus had found taped to his control panel last night. Or early this morning.

Now what?

Dreyfus was very aware a plan already in place would have been a great idea. But there wasn't one, and he didn't have one. There was no question in his mind he could beat this *Vulcan*, but what good did that do if it brought the full force of whoever the hostiles

were down on his single lance? How would that save the people they were guarding?

The *Vulcan* repeated the sign, his voice impatient.

"We are neutral," Dreyfus responded in clear. "Civilians are taking refuge in the park. There is no strategic value to this location. If you go around, avoid this area, we will not interfere. If you target the civilians, we will defend them."

He waited for long seconds, willing the *Vulcan* to turn back—or at least into a side street.

Instead, it stood immobile, as though considering Dreyfus's words. More likely the pilot was communicating with his commanders on a channel Dreyfus couldn't hear.

"Please go around," he urged.

The weapons lock alarm shripped, followed a half second later by four medium laser hits—lower torso, right leg and two along his right arm.

His targeting computer declared with one hundred percent probability Dreyfus was facing a *Vulcan* 5T. Wireframe reported lost armor but no structural damage.

Mindful he had no way to reload, Dreyfus answered with his own large laser. Going for a quick kill against the forward-thrusting cockpit, he saw his beam slash across the *Vulcan's* upper torso, just above the centrally-mounted medium laser. Not much there worth hurting.

A second weapons lock alarm and the Blizzard entered the fray, launching a flight of missiles that barely passed between the *Vulcan* and the buildings to its left. All five went wide, spending themselves along the stone facades facing the street before they reached Dreyfus.

He didn't know if the buildings were occupied, but the damage was enough to remind him that ammo conservation or no, it was best to end this quickly.

Pulling up his autocanon and one missile rack to augment his heavy laser, he targeted the *Vulcan's* centerline and unleashed a focused salvo. Solid hits, with only one of the missiles going wide to plough through the mob still filling the street, apparently expecting the BattleMech and APC to shield them from the *Bushwacker's* fire.

The *Vulcan* staggered back under the multiple impacts. The pilot and its autogyro would probably have kept it erect if its foot had not come down on one of the trucks crowded behind it. Overbalanced, it fell backwards, lurching to one side as the pilot wasted effort trying to get an arm around to break the machine's fall. Most of the mob had scattered with the missile blast, so very few liberated convicts were caught beneath the falling machine.

The Blizzard, trapped between the fallen 'Mech and the buildings, targeted the *Bushwacker* again. It never got the shot off. Before Dreyfus could cycle his weapons, the cockpit and fore end of the APC vaporized under the focused glare of two large lasers.

Glancing at his three-sixty, Dreyfus saw Anson had brought his *Falcon Hawk* up to flank him on his right.

"Good shooting," Dreyfus transmitted, "But who's minding the store?"

Anson didn't answer. Instead, he focused all four of his lasers on the *Vulcan* struggling to regain its feet and fired.

The hostile machine jerked violently as the converging beams gouged deep into its abdomen. Ripping metal and shrapnel spattering in all directions heralded the gyro tearing itself apart. The pilot powered down, signaling his surrender.

Anson leveled his ER large laser, clearly targeting the up-thrust cockpit.

"Don't," Dreyfus said. "If we're going to defend our people we can't have this guy's buddies hunting us down to settle some score."

"They're going to come anyway," Anson answered.

"Maybe," Dreyfus agreed. "But let's give them as many reasons as we can not to."

Anson said nothing, but lowered his weapon and turned back toward the park.

Surveying the street, Dreyfus saw only four trucks abandoned where they stood. Everyone alive had fled. Whether back toward TempTown or over to another PME terminal he didn't care, as long as they were away from his people. Confirming there was no heavy metal active in range of his sensors, he turned and followed Anson back to the park.

That was the first of several encounters. Or the beginning of one long skirmish. It depended on how much weight one assigned the pauses between. Usually the 'Mechs or armor that came their way were en route to other objectives. Some—a few—honored their announced neutrality and went around. More often, they had to back up their words with firepower.

Jerry, his *Centurion* unable to deliver knock-out punches with its medium lasers, had to rely heavily on his autocannon and LRM rack. Particularly since hostiles seemed to target the older 'Mech, assuming perhaps it was an easy target. By late morning, low on ammo, he'd moved to the entrance to the bunker, positioned so his forward and rearward facing lasers covered both directions along the street.

Dreyfus and Mike had shifted to compensate. The *Bushwacker* now covered the western half of the perimeter and the *Lineholder* the eastern. Anson's highly mobile *Falcon Hawk* roved between them, providing support as needed.

With all communications either jammed or in codes they didn't understand, their view of what was evidently a massive battle for Harlech—perhaps all of Outreach—was restricted to what their sensors could detect and they could see with their own eyes. Most of the time the view made no sense at all.

Columns of smoke, thick as a wall toward the center of town, but scattered all across the north side, told of Dragoon losses. But similar columns over TempTown and the hangars testified the damage wasn't all one-way. Aerospace and conventional fighters flashed by overhead, lances, solos, and whole companies of BattleMechs moved about the edges of their sensor umbrella. Through it all, the lance held its ground as the four of them popped stim tabs to make up for the lost night's sleep and announced their neutrality and determination to defend their people to anyone who came close.

At one point three Bandit hovercraft, bold in the colors of Wolf's Dragoons' Home Guard, dashed along the boulevard bordering the park. They neither acknowledge the park's declared neutrality nor slowed in their headlong rush toward their objective.

Sometime later Long Tom artillery inexplicably targeted the block north of the park. In a matter of minutes the apartment buildings were reduced to an acre of rubble. Dreyfus hoped all of the residents were safe in the bunker beneath his feet.

Things had been quiet for nearly an hour, when his sensor alarm sounded. Heavy metal on an incoming vector. He wasted a second looking for a hostile 'Mech on his three-sixty, before double-checking the sensor screen.

High target. Aerospace? A half second later the targeting computer identified a 'Mechbuster conventional aircraft coming down to attack altitude. His systems lost it as it dropped below the high horizon of the surrounding buildings.

He pivoted his *Bushwacker*, lining up on his best guess for the incoming plane's strafing run. Setting his radio to transmit on all clear channels it could reach, he broadcast their now-standard warning toward the incoming aircraft.

"We are not in this. We are defending a civilian haven. Do not approach." The plane should be right on top of him. "We are protecting—"

A cloud of missiles flashed into sight over the roofs of the buildings across the street. Twenty-four his computer counted, and he took its word for it. They were aimed high, passing over the park toward some target beyond.

Dreyfus pivoted at the waist, tracking their flight in time to see an *Enfield* dressed out in colors he didn't recognize be engulfed in flames. How had their sensors missed that?

A half-heartbeat later the 'Mechbuster passed overhead, wagging its wings before climbing for altitude. Stepping up his optics, Dreyfus caught a glimpse of dark charcoal grey with a bright silver ring of some sort, maybe a crown, and some three-lobed shape that had been covered over in black paint.

One more thing that made no sense.

Shifting his sights to the *Enfield*, he brought the legs of his *Bushwacker* around. Its right arm was missing and there seemed to be several rents across its lower torso and left leg. The pilot was backing away with a clumsy haste that indicated gyro damage as well.

"Mike!"

"Woulda had it if that plane hadn't beat me to the punch," Mike answered. "Who the hell was that?"

"Our escort," said an unfamiliar voice in clear over one of their channels. Channels that had been given to them by the hostiles.

"Identify!" Dreyfus ordered. "We are neutral, we are—"

"Defending civilians," the new voice cut him off. "Everybody south of Cameron Road knows you're here."

"Who are you?" Dreyfus demanded.

Stepping his sensors up to narrow focus to increase their resolution, he swept the perimeter a handful of degrees at a time.

"A few techs who decided our contracts weren't worth our souls," the voice answered. "From your stand here we're betting you understand the choice."

Dreyfus said nothing, not trusting the mysterious voice and its non-answer. Sixty degrees into his sweep he found them. Heavy metal, but no hot weapons— armored transports of some sort? Six of them ranging near twenty tons in mass. Nothing that size was a serious threat to a 'Mech by itself, but six in concert could bring down prey half again his size. The targeting computer also tagged a dozen more lighter vehicles, labeling them civilian-grade trucks or busses.

Passing the heading over to Anson, Dreyfus waited until the *Falcon Hawk* was out of sight, moving along a parallel vector to investigate, before speaking again.

"You're going to have to be more specific," he said. "We'll destroy anything that comes too close."

"We'd like to avoid that," said the voice. "You've pinged us, so you know we're not armed."

"I know your weapons aren't hot," Dreyfus corrected.

"Dre," Anson cut in on another channel before the newcomer could answer.

Dreyfus closed out the newcomer's channel and narrowed his transmission to a tight beam along Anson's vector.

"Go."

"Tally five J-two-seven transports with trailers, two of them empty," Anson reported. "Tally one MASH truck, laser turret shrouded and secured. Tally five cargo trucks, one loaded, five open and empty. And..."

"What else?" Dreyfus prompted after a few seconds of silence.

"Sorry," Anson answered. "Double checking. Tally seven city busses, five empty and two loaded with children."

"Circle south and east in case this parade is supposed to distract us from something else," Dreyfus ordered.

"On it."

Rotating his directional antenna, Dreyfus passed the information on to Mike and then Jerry. Both echoed his concern it was a diversion. He set Mike to making a narrow-focus sweep of the perimeter before reopening the channel to the newcomer.

"What do you want?"

"A partnership," the new voice offered. "We have reloads for your weapons and transportation for evacuating the civilians. What we don't have is enough firepower to protect ourselves."

"Who said anything about evacuation?" Dreyfus asked, one eye on the status boards, watching for either Anson or Mike to report.

"You think this is going to be over in a day?" the voice countered. "There's no fighting in the farmlands west of here, over the mountains. We're going to make a break for it tonight. We'd like you to come along."

Dreyfus paused as though considering.

"We can't leave our people," he said at last.

"Which is why we brought extra busses." The newcomer sounded as though he were patiently explaining the obvious to a child.

"We have over six hundred people here," Dreyfus answered.

"I counted seven hundred and eighty-two," Anson cut in, broadcasting wide on the same channel.

"And the perimeter is clear," Mike added.

"You were stalling while you checked us out," the newcomer sounded relieved. "For a minute I thought you were an idiot."

"Come in and we'll talk."

Two of the J-27s had the same spiky silver crown emblem as the 'Mechbuster and all of the military vehicles had a triangular or three-lobed unit insignia that had been covered over in black or green or brown—evidently whatever dark paint that came to hand.

The newcomers weren't eager to discuss their past and all things considered neither Dreyfus nor the others felt inclined to press.

In person, their leader identified himself as Larry Green and he and his crew quickly proved they were the techs they claimed to be. One team carried portable generators, medical supplies, lights, water, and field rations into the bunker, making sure everyone was fed, clean and patched up for the journey ahead. A second team reloaded the cannon rounds and missiles Jerry, Mike and Dreyfus had expended and made quick work of field patching their armor. A third team searched the neighborhood for useable vehicles, bringing back the five trucks abandoned by the convict infantry that morning and a dozen other vans and panel trucks. By nightfall they'd assembled and fueled enough to transport everyone.

Getting everyone aboard and squared away involved several hours of logistics and negotiations. But eventually all families were united and—carrying only possessions necessary for survival—loaded aboard the various vehicles.

Their escape route was simplicity itself—the shortest straight line out of town. Following the boulevard that bordered the north side of the park, they passed under the elevated PME—which did indeed seem to still have power—crossed the North-South Highway and ascended into the foothills of the Ridge, the chain of low mountains that formed Harlech's western border.

They saw other groups of refugees moving out of the city. Some joined them, some ran at the sight the BattleMechs. Looters—the human cockroaches every disaster brought out—were already making their way into town. Some gave the bunker park party a hungry eye in passing, but the leveled weapons of the BattleMechs persuaded them to keep their distance.

It was past midnight when they left the last of the buildings behind them. For the first time, Dreyfus felt he could pilot his *Bushwacker* without hunching his shoulders. The *Bushwacker*, low and broad, and powerful, was meant for fighting in the open. Fighting clean.

Bringing up the rear of the column, he paused at the top of the Ridge, turning to look back over Harlech. Parts of the grid work of city streets were still lit, other parts were dark, and far too many burned, obscuring much of the view. The comm call had come twenty-four hours ago and he hadn't slept since. Probably wouldn't sleep for another dozen hours at least. He didn't know what lay ahead, but he felt good.

Turning his back on the burning city but keeping a watchful eye on his sensor screens, he followed his people. Somewhere back there in Harlech was a line in the dust. Whatever else happened, whatever came next, he knew he stood firm on the right side of that line.

