

PACK HUNTERS

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Monhegan
Federated Suns

Lieutenant Ivan Sharpe watched the range fall on his heads-up display as he approached the nav marker. He kept his hands steady on the controls of his command-variant (two-seater) Cavalry Attack Helicopter despite the heavy vibrations and the crackle of burning wiring behind him in the cockpit. They had to get there in time.

The militia 'Mechs had lost the pirates at the edge of the Bankin Preserve, which meant that they were headed for the depot at the forest's heart. Sharpe's contract, his colonel's contract, held them responsible for that depot. It was his to defend, now that the militia had dropped the ball.

Four 'Mechs, fifty tons and higher. Sharpe blinked. Twelve helicopters to stop four BattleMechs. His console pinged at him as the Cavalry roared past the nav point at better than 160 kph.

"All flights," he said on the company channel, "keep together and keep moving. We can hold these guys until the 'Mechs get here. We just have to stick together." They were promised a DropShip and 'Mechs.

"Nice speech," his gunner said.

"You do the shooting," he told her. He pulled back on his yoke and balanced the cyclic, bringing the Cavalry around and pointing it at the depot, two kilometers distant. "I'll do the talking."

"That's a heavy lance, Ivan," she said.

"We can do it," he said. They had to do it. No one else from Regiment could get there in time. It was his helicopters or the pirates had enough time to destroy the depot. He turned the Cavalry's nose away from the depot and onto the last bearing reported.

"Let's find them," he said on the open channel, "and let's kill them."



Warm shafts of sunlight penetrated the thick Monhegan forest cover. A bird flashed in and out of the sunlight between the thick gray maple trunks. Dominic Halstead smiled as he watched it, forgetting for an instant what brought him to this world. But only for an instant.

An alarm blared inside his cockpit as the mercenary's lasers found him. The waspish beams feasted on the armor covering his *Centurion's* chest, flash-heating the aligned diamond-steel composite until it ran like water. Dominic snarled into his neurohelmet and snatched at his controls, willing the 'Mech to respond. He was too slow.

"Someone needs to do something about these bugs," he said. He let the *Centurion's* balky right arm fall. The screech of tortured metal coming from the damaged shoulder actuator made him cringe. Outside the insulated safety of his cockpit, that sound would carry for kilometers.

A burst of static belched in his speakers, and then a voice. "Then bloody do something about them," Charlie said. The telltale scratch of interference marked the firing of Charlie's big Donal PPCs, making Dominic close his eyes. Too much gun for so small a target, he thought. Not that Charlie wasn't right. Sometimes the big guns were all you had.

The unit had been on Monhegan for a day, scouting toward the loot. Charlie had led them here from Brockway, the full lance, to snatch some parts from a transit depot. Kerensky knew they needed the parts. Charlie's Black Angels had seen better days, even before they turned bandit. It was supposed to be a simple job: walk in, shill the defenders, and walk out. Charlie paid good for the information. With the nonsense down in the Cluster heating up with the Taurians, he figured no one would be watching all the way up here.

No one except these double-damned helicopters. Ever since they skunked the 'Mech pursuit at the edge of the forest, Charlie had been intolerably cocky. Then the first helicopter spotted them, and the poking began.

Dominic pushed his controls forward, moving the *Centurion* between two massive Monhegan maple trees. The jutting shoulder guards on the 'Mech's arm cut deep grooves in the sappy bark, but Dominic paid them no mind. The air in his cockpit was warm, but not stifling, and filled with the smells of a day in the cockpit. He toyed with the idea of opening the hatch to let some fresh air

in, but a glance at the humidity index told him it would be a bad idea.

"At least it's not 'Mechs," Johnny Baron said. His *Dragon* was walking left flank, opposite Dominic's *Centurion*.

"'Mechs would be easier," the rearguard 'Mech's pilot said. Janice Lipton preferred to face other 'Mechs. They were usually scared of her. Not too many jocks would tangle with a *Stalker*.

"Keep it down," Charlie said. "We're getting near the edge of the woods. If you see a chopper, burn it down." The defenders liked picking on Charlie's *Warhammer*. Dominic had echoed the damage schematics from Charlie's 'Mech a few times; the vintage machine was more melted armor than 'Mech. Dominic had gotten a good view when they'd crossed a small clearing, and nearly burst his gut laughing. The *Warhammer* looked like it had been molested by an army of gremlins with screwdrivers.

Just then his cockpit alarms blared a warning: two more of the damned aircraft were coming toward him. He raised the *Centurion's* right arm and canted the torso back to unmask his long-range missiles. No plastic bug was going to get a free shot at him, not this time.

The helicopters roared overhead without firing. His own burst of cannon fire and group of missiles rippled harmlessly into the sky, kilometers away from Dominic's intended target. He swore into his neurohelmet, ignoring the chuckles it elicited from his lance-mates.

God damn these mercenaries.



Sharpe dragged his yoke to the left, bringing the nose of his Cavalry Attack Helicopter around to port. The pirate lance was still under the cover of the thick Monhegan forest, but they wouldn't stay there. The depot was barely two kilometers away, safely hidden in plain sight. It sat in the middle of a cleared fire zone a square kilometer in size. The pirates were barely a half a klick from the edge of the zone.

"Any word on the 'Mechs?" Sharpe radioed.

"Nothing yet, Ell Tee." His wingman, Warrant Officer Samuel Howe, was in touch with Regiment. "Last I heard the DropShip was still boosting."

"Bloody great," Sharpe muttered. He brought the Cavalry into a low hover, meters above the treetops, and watched as the rest of his company swarmed on the pirate's position. Pain made him shrug his shoulders together. The cockpit was too tight for him. There were calluses on the outsides of his knees where they rubbed against his instrument panel. The techs had given up repainting the scuff marks. The gentle stinging smell of burnt wiring told him his mad flight to get into position had cost him, but he ignored it. Either maintenance would take care of it or he'd be dead.

The platoon of Mantis Light Attack Helicopters that made up his Three Flight were blurs, zipping along at treetop height to flash laser fire at the pirate 'Mechs before they could respond. The Cavalry's own targeting system couldn't keep a detailed track on the 'Mechs at anything over a hundred meters, but the Beagle probes in the strike helicopters were more discerning.

Two Flight's four heavy Yellow Jackets were hovering just off the ground behind the depot itself, waiting for the pirates to emerge so they could engage at range with the mammoth Gauss rifles slung under their fuselages. It had taken them a bit longer to arrive. The big gunships were ponderously slow compared to the strikers, but they compensated in other ways.

The other two Cavalrys of One Flight were following Three Flight, dropping missile barrages on targets marked by laser fire. But were they hitting anything?

"Three-One," Sharpe called, "report."

Warrant Officer Danielson's voice was too chipper for the situation. "Still beating the bushes, Ell Tee." There was a flicker of light on Sharpe's cockpit canopy. "Three-three and -four are still making runs."

"Return fire?"

"Are they shooting, sir?"

Sharpe couldn't help but smile. "Shoot 'n scoot, Mike."

"As long as they stay in the woods, Ell Tee."

Sharpe brought the Cavalry's nose down and accelerated toward the engagement zone, Danielson's words echoing in his head. Once the 'Mechs were out of the woods they'd have clearer shots at his birds. They were fast, but his helicopters had weak wings. It would only take one shot to down most of his craft.

And those 'Mechs had a lot of guns.



"I can see the edge of the woods," Charlie said. Dominic looked at the grainy image painted on his tactical display and sighed. The killing field was everything the intel predicted: a full kilometer of open terrain. The open ground beckoned to Dominic's anger. He saw himself smashing enemy helicopters to the ground like a colossus. Damn these trees anyway.

"I'm clear," Baron said. Dominic's tactical display painted the icon for the *Dragon* just outside the treeline. There was a grin in his Baron's exultant voice, and beneath it the staccato roar of his autocannon firing. Dominic opened his mouth to reply when his console beeped at him. Four more red icons flared into being behind the depot.

"Oh, shit," Baron said.

The exposed blue *Dragon* icon flickered and died.

"Stay in the woods!" Charlie shouted. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, stay in the woods!"



"That's a kill!" Sharpe called. He dove the Cavalry past the downed 'Mech, noting the heavy damage Two Flight's Gauss rifles had done to the sixty-ton 'Mech. Two of the rounds had combined to tear the *Dragon's* left arm off at the shoulder, and a third was actually embedded in a rent in the tough torso armor over the 'Mech's heart. The final round had done the killing, however, demolishing the recessed cockpit between the Dragon's shoulders. "Nice shooting, Two Flight!"

Acceleration pressed him into his seat as he pulled back on the cyclic, raising the Cavalry higher in the air. His gunner, Corporal Julie Madsen, loosed a barrage of missiles at the treeline as they passed.

"Thought I saw something in the woods," she said. The airframe vibrated as the heavy missiles rotated in the launcher, but Sharpe was long accustomed to the oscillation.

"I don't tell you how to shoot," he said, bringing the Cavalry around.

"And I don't tell you how to fly." There was a pause, and then she gestured left from her seat in front of him. "Now go over there. I want to blow something up."



"Baron is gone, man!" Charlie was saying. "Must have been turrets on the depot or something. Artillery maybe. Something took him down in single salvo."

Dominic grimaced and flicked the switch that muted the speakers in his neurohelmet. He'd seen the icons; it was more helicopters. More of these damn annoying insects that pecked and pecked until they hit something important.

Trees exploded a hundred meters to his left as one of the bugs unloaded another fart of missiles. He flexed his fingers and toggled his com system back on. They had to stay together.

"—we should have brought the DropShip," Charlie was saying.

"Shut up for a minute," Dominic yelled.

"—Good Christ, maybe it's the Clans—"

"Shut up, damn it!"

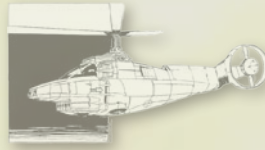
"—there was some down in St. Ives, remember?"

Dominic turned the *Centurion* away from the woodline and toward Charlie's *Warhammer*. It was only a hundred and fifty meters or so, but the trees slowed him down. Charlie didn't stop babbling the whole time. Dominic came up behind the *Warhammer* and raised the fist on the *Centurion's* left arm.

Then he pushed the seventy-ton 'Mech over.

"God damn it, Halstead!" Charlie said. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Saving our asses," he said evenly. "Now shut up and listen."



"We're not going to hold them once they get into the zone," Madsen said over the Cavalry's intercom. Sharpe nodded at the words, knowing full well she couldn't see it from her position in front of him.

"We'll hurt them, though," he said. "One-Two!" Howe. "Any word on the 'Mechs?"

"They're in the air, Ell Tee."

"ETA?"

"According to Regiment," Howe said, "They're on deorbit now. A couple of minutes to drop range."

"Maybe we can hold them," Sharpe said. Only a couple of minutes. Another fool might wander out where Two Flights guns could chop him. The bastards might stay lost in the woods for that long.

"Here they come," Madsen said, just as a flight of missiles skipped past the fuselage.

Or they might not.



Dominic led the charge out of the treeline, letting loose a flight of missiles at a conveniently close helicopter. They missed, but the bug's pilot jerked his nose away from the lance, and that was something.

"Make for the depot," Charlie called. His *Warhammer* was between Dominic's *Centurion* and Lipton's hulking *Stalker*. The azure

fury of his Donal PPCs flashed past Dominic, making the hair on his arms stand out. Both shots missed, but they scattered another bunch of bugs.

"Keep up your fire," Dominic said, "and we can keep them off balance long enough to get inside the depot. They won't dare drop missiles on us in there."

"You'd better duck, Halstead," Janice Lipton called.

A sledgehammer blasted the *Centurion* in the center of the chest, slowing its rush enough that Dominic had to clutch at his controls to keep it on its feet. Out of the corner of his eye he saw an explosion of dirt and a silver flash. The other helicopters had come out again. The ones that had killed Baron and his *Dragon*.

Now they were shooting at him.

"Son of a bitch," he cursed. A loud clunk from deep inside the *Centurion's* chest announced the readiness of his missiles, and he wasted no time. Dragging the reticle over the ungainly shape of one of the gunships, he jerked the trigger. He watched the missiles, ignoring the other helicopters driving toward him, and snarled in triumph as the LRM barrage tore one of the gunship's rotors off, sending it crashing to the ground.

"That's one," he said. Only a dozen or so more to go.



Sharpe held the yoke as far over as it would go, trying to ignore both the pyre that had been one of his Yellow Jackets and Julie Madsen's shouting. The legs of his G-suit inflated, pushing the blood back into his torso as the helicopter banked. Julie swore again and slapped a hand against the canopy for balance.

"Turn so I can shoot one of the fuckers!" she said.

"Do you want to drive?"

"Do you want to shoot?"

"Coming around," he said. "Hit that bastard!"

"Almost in range," Madsen said.

The missiles' firing was anticlimactic. Sharpe watched all three flights bore in on the *Centurion*. Most of them hit, knocking the slender 'Mech to the ground. He kept the Cavalry's nose down, speeding toward the target. The airframe oscillated in time with the reload sequence. A few more seconds. Sweaty hands tightened on the cyclic, damp and slick inside his gloves.

The *Centurion* flashed underneath and out of Sharpe's vision. It had just begun to rise. Sharpe heeled the Cavalry over, letting the acceleration push him back in his seat. Lightning flashed past as the *Warhammer* trailing the *Centurion* fired again, but the storm of ions passed a dozen meters beneath them.

"Nice stop, Ell Tee," Danielson called. Sharpe jerked his eyes away from the *Centurion* and found the four needles of Three Flight. "Can we play too?"

The lead Mantis dropped its nose and its altitude until it was skimming barely three meters from the ground. The other three fell in behind it, sliding from side to side as they accelerated. A column of dust rose behind the 'copters as they passed 180 kph.

"Three Flight," Danielson said. "Light him up."

The glare was bright even through the darkened visor of his helmet. Sharpe watched the four VTOLs skip past the kneeling 'Mech, each one stinging as it went. The Mantis' broke by pairs, one going left, the other right.

The *Stalker* in the rear of the formation settled back on its haunches and blew the leftmost pair out of the sky.

"Three-One!" Sharpe called. "Mike!" Static answered him.

"Howe!"

"Three minutes, Ell Tee," his wingman called.

Three minutes. Surely they could hold for three more minutes. Sharpe angled the Cavalry around a clutch of stubborn maples. One hundred eighty seconds. That was all the time he needed.

"Thirty seconds and three 'copters," Julie Madsen said. "Doing the math, Ivan?"

"We can hold," he snarled. The contract said they'd hold. They would hold. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. A quarter of his strength was gone. How was he going to slow them down? A plan flashed through his mind, but he frowned. It would be expensive.

There was nothing else left to try. Sharpe rolled his head around, listening to the sinews in his neck crackle. His calves tightened as he flexed his legs in the cramped cockpit. To stand up straight again, to stretch, would be Heaven.

"Okay, troops," he said on the company channel, "new plan."



The ground shook as Charlie's *Warhammer* charged past Dominic's *Centurion*. Debris danced on the cockpit panels, pieces of controls knocked loose during the last attack. It had taken him two tries to get the *Centurion* on its feet.

"Stop lounging, Halstead," Charlie sent as he passed.

"Easy for you to say," Dominic muttered. The armor schematic on his damage panel showed more red than green. The lasers had shredded armor all across his 'Mech. He remembered how he'd described the damage to Charlie's 'Mech—gremlins with screwdrivers—and moved the *Centurion*'s left arm up to where he could see it. He laughed. The description fit.

"We're almost there," Charlie said.

"I've got your backs," Lipton said. Her *Stalker* was a hundred meters behind them, barely out of the woods. It was a smart position. It would take her behemoth a good month to hump its way to the depot. Back there she could range her lasers and missiles across the field as needed.

"The bugs are doing something new," Charlie said.

Dominic ignored the *Centurion*'s arm and concentrated on the tactical screen. Three of the VTOLs were clustered behind the depot, using the buildings for cover. The three heavy hitters, Dominic thought. The rest were arcing around behind it, two hundred meters back.

"They're coming around," he said.

"Then get up here," Charlie said. His *Warhammer* paused long enough to stamp the two-meter gates before moving into the depot proper. "We're in."

As one the three remaining Yellow Jackets rose from behind the depot and fired. Dominic saw the birds appear, saw the flicker in

his instruments as three high-capacity electromagnetic cannons discharged in close proximity. He braced himself, prepared to be knocked over again.

Janice Lipton cursed.

"You okay?" Dominic asked.

"Please shoot those things," she said. "They poked big holes in my pretty 'Mech."

"Heads up," Charlie called.

The rest of the swarm flashed overhead, led by the three thicker-bodied aircraft. Dominic couldn't get the *Centurion's* arm up fast enough; the earlier attacks had melted armor into the right shoulder assembly. Charlie got a flight of missiles off, but they flew wide.

"Janice," Dominic said, but that was all he had time for.

Thirty-six short-range missiles knocked the massive *Stalker* over on its side like it was made of paper. It disappeared beneath a hellish storm of explosions. The hefty breeze carried the smoke just far enough away that Dominic saw the eighty-five ton 'Mech struggling to rise. A ruby flash from its arm-mounted lasers tore the tail from one of its attackers, but the damage had been done. The *Stalker's* left knee was shredded.

The trailing pair of 'copters arrived, and Dominic looked away. There was a flicker of reflected light across his controls. A pain-wracked scream screeched in his helmet speakers, distorted at the transmission point by hideous feedback. He heard the explosion through his cockpit as the *Stalker's* ammunition exploded; felt it in the ground.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Charlie said. "We're dead."

"You might be right," Dominic said.

The *Centurion's* long-range scanners pinged.



Sharpe ignored the cheering over the channel. He concentrated on watching One-Three crash. The *Stalker's* parting shot had tak-

en Dancing's tail rotor clean off, and the torque from the massive blade was spinning the 'copter like a top. The pilot managed to aim the stricken craft for a clearing in the maples, but it still hit hard, flipping onto its side. The Cavalry's thick rotor tore itself to pieces against the hard Monhegan soil, but it looked as though the crew might have survived.

"One minute for the 'Mechs," Howe called from One-Two. He was orbiting the crash opposite Sharpe.

"We can take them, Ell Tee," Madsen said.

"They're just sort of milling around," Two-One reported. "I think they're scared, Ell Tee."

Sharpe brought the Cavalry's nose around to point at the depot. The *Warhammer* was actually shuffling around—Sharpe had never seen a 'Mech look nervous before—but the *Centurion* was watching them, its big right-arm cannon already pointed.

"The 'Mechs will be here in forty-five seconds," Howe said. "Let them handle it."

Two 'Mechs for five helicopters. Sharpe knew it would be a clean victory at Regiment. His troopers had done more than their share today. Helicopters don't usually stop 'Mechs.

But his brief was the depot, and the pirates held the depot. Any second now they could start shooting it up, and all the 'Mechs in the world couldn't save the munitions and parts there.

"We'll take them," he said.

"But the 'Mechs—"

"Are dropping, I know," Sharpe said. "The pirates will be looking up at them, not down at us. Form up on me, flank speed, one pass and then support the 'Mechs."

"You're sure about this?" Howe asked.

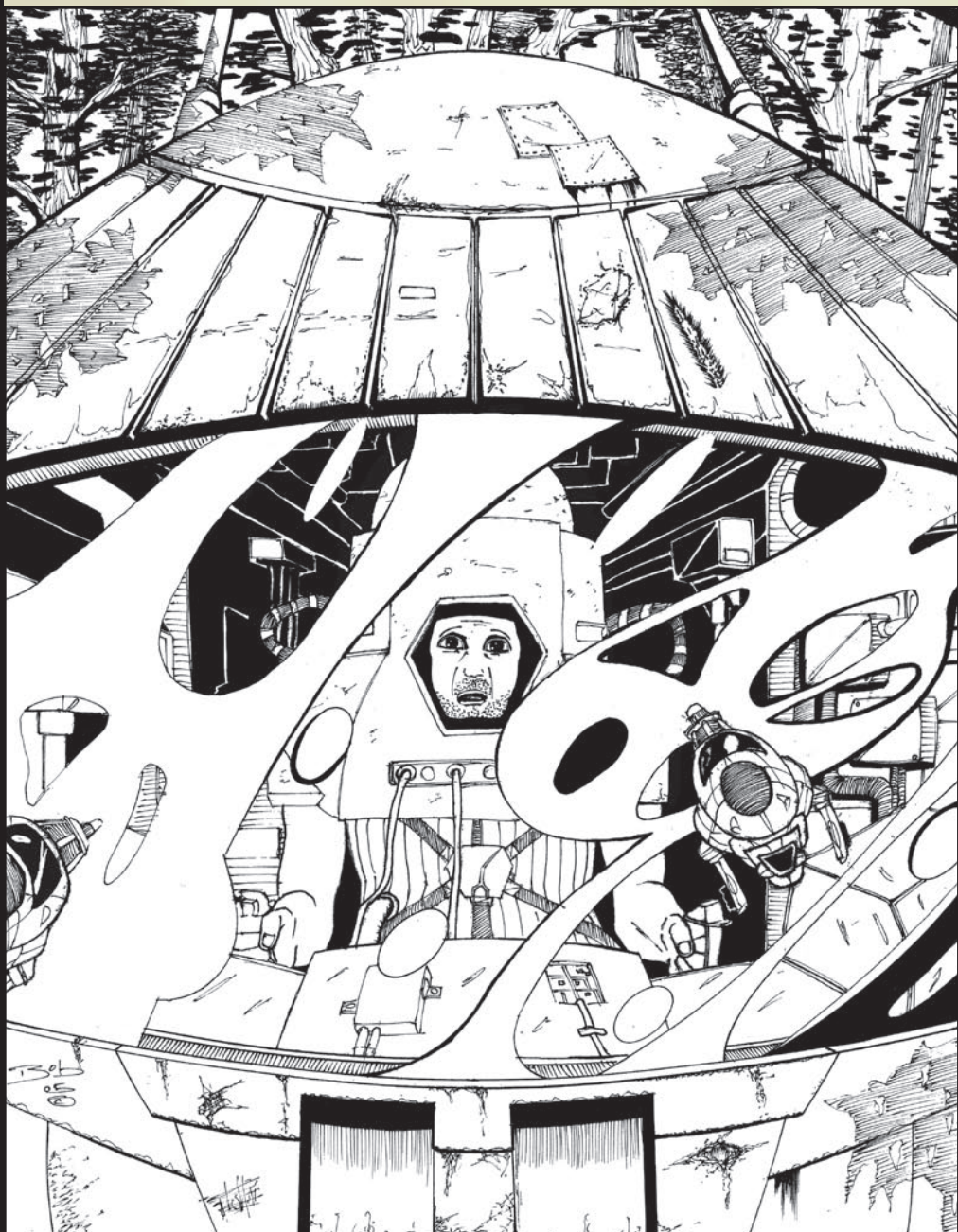
"That's our depot," he said. "Two fight, wait until we get there, then pop-and-stop."

Leaving the downed helicopter where it was, the remaining VTOLs fell in behind Sharpe's Cavalry and accelerated. Overhead, the sky flashed with the blue flame of BattleMech drop packs.



"We're so dead," Charlie said.

"They're coming back," Dominic said. He moved forward until he could hide most of the *Centurion* behind the wall. His missiles could bear, but only just. He was hiding from helicopters. A week ago he'd have laughed at anyone who suggested it.



"That's a lance of 'Mechs coming down, Halstead."

"The helicopters will be here before them."

"They're going to kill us."

"Fine." Dominic stabbed the com system off and concentrated on the 'copters. His HUD showed him range, bearing, and speed. All had passed one hundred fifty kph, and the trailers were still accelerating. He squeezed his triggers, firing everything, even the rear-mounted laser. It would hit *something* behind him.

Even Charlie got a shot off, a beautiful PPC stroke that splashed itself over the leading 'copter's nose. It wasn't enough. Dominic's cannon fire tore the rotors from one of the trailing targets, sending the slender arrowhead into the hard Monhegan ground. A hoarse victory scream escaped from deep in his gut.

Then the 'copters arrived, and Dominic's world exploded.



Sharpe's right hand cramped into a painful claw as soon as he set the Cavalry down outside the depot. He clutched at it with his left, kneading at the knot of muscle in the palm. Julie Madsen laughed.

"It hurts," he said.

"What?" She unbuckled her restraints and twisted in her seat. "No, the canopy is stuck."

Sharpe frowned and looked away from his hand. There was a gray splash on the left side of the canopy, armor flash-melted by the *Warhammer's* final shot and redeposited on the Cavalry's canopy. It had sealed the cockpit closed.

"I told you to go right," Madsen said.

"Don't tell me how to fly," Sharpe said.

A man tapped on the side of the Cavalry and gestured to Sharpe. The man was wearing a cooling vest; that made him the lance commander for the recently arrived 'Mechs.

Sharpe pointed to the melted armor fusing the cockpit closed. "Won't open," he shouted, hoping the man heard him.

"We could be here a while," Madsen said as the man turned and beckoned to a couple other dismounted 'Mech jocks.

"Some of us longer than others," Sharpe said, going back to massaging his hand. Half his company down. Most commands were disbanded with fifty percent losses.

"You did good, Ivan," Madsen said.

"I got a lot of good troops killed."

"No," she said. "They did that." She pointed over his shoulder at the smashed shape of the pirate *Warhammer*. Once Sharpe had captured their attention, Two Flight had popped up and put them down with accurate Gauss fire to the back. The arriving 'Mechs had charged up ready for battle, only to find smoldering wrecks.

"I should have waited for the 'Mechs."

Madsen took his cramped hand in hers and began massaging the palm for him. "You couldn't have done that. Then the depot would be burning and we'd be supporting a 'Mech battle, trying to keep that idiot from getting killed." The MechWarrior was trying to chip the fused armor with the tip of a combat knife. Sharpe watched him until he managed to break the blade. Then he turned his head and laughed. A steel blade against diamond-weave composite.

"You might be right," he said.