

BATTLECORPS

ABANDONMENT

Blaine Lee Pardoe



Drop Zone Theta Alpha
The Attore Bluff
Ford
Lyrans Commonwealth
April 10, 3022

Lieutenant Charles “Charlie” Vincent Bane stepped over the crest of the bluff in his *Dervish* and braked to a full stop in stunned disbelief. There was supposed to be a DropShip there. This was the right coordinates, he checked his secondary display again. *No way in hell I’m off—I’ve been tracking my position for four days.* It had to be a mistake.

There were *signs* a DropShip had been here recently. The grass and brush were burned clear and the ground was caked from the intense heat of the fusion engines. There were four massive depressions in the ground, perfect circles 20 centimeters deep, from left by the DropShip’s gigantic landing feet. There was debris, the kind of garbage and trash usually left behind when a ship departed. But there was no DropShip at the top of the bluff. None. Two hours of climbing Attore Bluff and no ride offworld. He swept the entire bluff with his long-range sensors, but found nothing more than a faint radioactive signature about a half-kilometer from the charred ground. He tagged the image on his display as the reality soaked in.

They had left. There was no wreckage from a DropShip in the area. There may have been some sort of a fight here, but the ship had not been destroyed, at least, not here. They had simply left.

Bane pounded his command console. *How could they have left him?* He felt a stinging around the edge of his eyes and fought back tears. It had been a long week of hard travel to reach the drop zone, only to find it empty. They had taken off early, *he* was on time. They weren’t supposed to leave a man behind, that was part of the code. MechWarriors didn’t do that, not House Marik MechWarriors, anyway. The Lyrans, well, that was a different story. He knew them to be a heartless crowd, but not the Captain General’s men. His comrades had a sense of honor. But the absence of the DropShip told him a different reality, one that he was suddenly forced to deal with.

Perhaps the sensor reading could tell him more. He angled his battered *Dervish* to the northeast and pushed across the charred

ground. As he got closer, he saw lots of burn marks in the grass, the occasional crater, telltale marks of errant expendables fired in battle. When he saw the charred hulk of the Mobile HQ, the purple eagle of the Third Sirian Lancers, he realized the drop zone had been overrun.

Idling his *Dervish*, he climbed out of his cockpit, pulled out his needler, and trotted to the blackened hulk of a vehicle. *Something destroyed this entire HQ and I'm thinking a needler is going to help...I must be crazy or stupid or both.* Holes stitched along the side in a diagonal pattern showed several autocannon hits. The air stung his nostrils, a hint of sweat, charred armor, even rotting flesh—most likely from the crushed remains of the HQ's mangled cockpit. The side door was half-cracked open. He touched it quickly, half wondering if it was hot, but he only felt cold, broken metal.

Climbing inside, he saw the interior of the HQ was a wreck, but had not been badly burned. It appeared that the armored exterior had bore the brunt of the damage. A salvage crew had made quick work of anything worth taking. The remaining consoles were shattered; two of them were broken off their mountings and hanging by strands of wires just over the floor. The long range sensors had simply been removed, right down to the wiring. He stepped over a cracked, dried brown stain on the floor—blood, proof of the fight that had doomed the vehicle.

The primary battlerom was gone. Most likely the victors of the battle had pulled it. It made sense, who knows what kind of military secrets they might find? *None, if I know Colonel Zander. He would never send us in with any data that might be turned against our people.*

Charlie moved over a fallen chair and to the tactical feed. He opened the access port, reached in and extracted the small, circular chip—the backup battlerom for the HQ. Perhaps it might tell him what had happened here and where the DropShip had gone. He descended from the HQ and sprinted to his *Dervish*. He had to find some cover to sort through everything, then decide what his next move would be.

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The copse of trees provided ample cover for his tiny camp. He'd built the fire against a large boulder that blocked most of the light it gave off. Dinner was a rations pack, old and cold, the way he

liked it. He'd rigged his *Dervish's* sensors to alert him if anyone approached. In the meantime, he got some much needed time out of the cockpit.

The backup battlerom hadn't offered much in terms of hope or good news. Using his battlecomputer, he had had been able to recover enough to piece together what happened. Three days ago, the Ford Planetary Militia had swept up this plateau and overran the landing zone. The Mobile HQ had fallen to the rear of the column and was finally overrun. The DropShip, *The Liberty Bell*, had been given orders to depart. They were the last orders that the Mobile HQ had sent, and the ship had apparently obeyed.

This had been the secondary drop zone, his last hope for a ride offworld. The raid by the Third Sirian Lancers had been a QCCF, a quasi-controlled-cluster-fu** from the moment they had landed. The overrunning of the drop zone by planetary militia had been the icing on the proverbial cake.

Charles leaned against his sleeping bag and stared up at the stars. Some of those stars were those of his home, the Free Worlds League. He wondered if he was ever going to find his way back to those stars now. When the operation had started his mission was simple, take his lance of 'Mechs about 100 kilometers from the landing zone and take out a munitions plant near the city of Gunster. Ford's position along the border made it a tempting target, and the Lyran Commonwealth made sure that the world was heavily garrisoned. They had landed with a full battalion, usually more than enough for a lightning raid.

Someone had tipped off the Lyrans, at least that was Charlie's thinking. They had popped up with at least twice as many troops and from the way they fought, they were anything but local militia. *Military intelligence had screwed the pooch on this one.* Every one of the raiding parties had run into well-placed, highly-organized resistance. House Marik had not planned on taking Ford from the Commonwealth, they just wanted to make sure it was of no value to the Lyrans. But the Lyrans had been there, waiting, more than prepared to face them. *If I ever get off this rock I'm going to kick our regimental intelligence officer in the balls...*

Most likely the defenders were some frontline Guards units painted up to look like the locals. As Charlie and Bravo Lance of the Second Company reached the outskirts of their objective, he started to get communications feeds from the other officers. Every raiding unit had stumbled into some sort of trap. Captain Foster had taken two lances of heavies into a swamp that had

been sewn with vibramines. What the mines didn't destroy, the lance of aerospace fighters had bombed into oblivion. A classmate and comrade of his, Bucky Barrington, had been sent to take out a key switch station on the mag lev line. Finding it heavily defended, he had barely escaped with his life.

Their warnings prepped Charlie. He sent out a light *Stinger*, Lieutenant Christi Parker, to scout. She'd barely managed to bark a warning before the enemy was all over her. The lance of assaults and heavies had hit them hard. Charlie had accounted for one, a nasty old *Catapult*. The remains of his lance, against his orders, had charged towards the plant, firing as they went. They drew the rest of the defenders with them. By the time Charlie had finished the *Catapult*, the rest of his MechWarriors were dead and the defenders were heading his way. He had been hopelessly outmanned and outgunned.

So, he ran. It shamed him, but he ran away. The choice was life or a brief but lonely death, and at the time, that didn't seem reasonable. Bane's *Dervish* pulled away from the Lyrans and he kept going. After a while, the Lyrans broke off their pursuit. After all, he was a lone BattleMech, already damaged. How much trouble could he cause? Charlie shook his head. He didn't know the answer to that question even now, days later.

As he stared up at the stars he wondered, *what now?* If *The Liberty Bell* was gone, then so was the rest of the Third Sirian Lancers. He wondered if there were others like him, abandoned on Ford, left to fend for themselves. If there were others, how could he contact them? Using the secured channels might work, but it would still alert the Lyrans that he was still on Ford. With the other members of the Free Worlds League raiding party gone, they would be free to hunt him down like some wild animal.

He pulled out his survival kit, unrolling it in the fire's dim light. The usual implements were there; a large knife, a fishing kit, a small, pen-size power pack, some emergency ration bars that were probably vintage First Succession War, from the look of the labels. A fire-igniter, which he wished he'd found before he spent thirty minutes trying to light the fire on his own. There were emergency flares, a tissue-thin thermal blanket, an emergency pulse communicator—all good to have, but worthless in his current situation.

There was some money there too. About fifty C-bills, some Marik dollars, and a few Lyran minted coins. Enough for a good night on the town, but hardly enough to scrape together a living. As he studied the contents of the survival kit, he realized just how bad

things were for him and how limited his options were. He rolled up the kit carefully in its tube and leaned back to stare up at the stars again.

Surrender? He looked up at his *Dervish* and cringed. The BattleMech was old, not like the newer model Davion *Dervishes* they were allegedly making. This one dated back generations. It had been his grandmother's BattleMech, and his father's and had been in the family way before they had piloted it. Surrender meant that the 'Mech would become spoils of war. The Lyrans would take it, refit it, and use it—*against* the Free Worlds League. His 'Mech might very well kill members of his own family.

And if he did surrender, then what? Prisoner of war camp? He had heard the stories about the Lyran camps, of the torture and mistreatment. Some of that had to be propaganda, but even those lies started with a grain of truth. Would they try and squeeze military secrets from him? He chuckled at the thought. Charles Vincent Bane didn't know any useful secrets. The shame of surrender would stain him for the rest of his life, even if he managed to get exchanged and sent home. Worse, he would be dispossessed. Being a MechWarrior carried status, and that was hard to let go.

If surrender wasn't an option, he wondered what was. Could he use his money to book passage on a commercial DropShip off-world? Probably not. He could possibly send a short message via HPG, but he had no idea what to send and to whom. The money wasn't enough and as a world on the border, the officials of Ford were going to be looking for proper paperwork and identification. False IDs could be purchased, but Charlie realized that he didn't have the kind of connections needed. And, even if he could get passage offworld, what about his 'Mech? He would return in disgrace and dispossessed. They would never give him a military command again, there would always be some concern if he had been turned by the enemy and sent back as a mole.

Ford was a large planet with plenty of terrain for hiding. Perhaps he could conceal his 'Mech and get a job, blend in. Over time he might earn enough money to book passage off-planet. Would he be able to take his 'Mech then? Was it a matter of money? Yes, there were unscrupulous merchants with DropShips, but how would he arrange for transport of a 'Mech off a Lyran world, bound for the Free Worlds League? There was no amount of money he could earn that would pay that kind of bill. Each option he explored offered less appeal. No matter how well he hid the 'Mech, there was a risk that someone would find it. BattleMechs required mainte-

nance and his had already been in a fight. Without proper supplies, maintenance, and the gear to mothball his ride properly, his 'Mech could soon be rendered useless. Bane didn't have the equipment or money necessary to keep the machine operational indefinitely.

He closed his eyes for a moment and drew in a deep, sighing breath. There was something else nagging at him as his options seemed to evaporate. He, Lieutenant Charles Bane, had fled his last engagement. He felt his face flush with the memory. When he realized his lance had stumbled into a trap, he'd ordered them out, but they had not obeyed. The cost had been their lives. Bane had run. In the face of the enemy, he had turned his back and run to save his own life. The mission had not mattered, nor had the fate of the rest of his lance. Charlie had run. Even if he did return to the Free Worlds League, the truth would come out. Charlie had never been a good liar. They would interrogate him and learn that he had fled the fight. With the losses and ambushes, chances are they would label him as the scapegoat.

The shame welled up in him and he crossed his arms, hugging himself tightly in the cool evening chill as if to ward against it. Charlie felt he could handle the disgrace, but he knew his parents couldn't, nor could his brother. His brother, Drake, served in the Second Sirian Lancers regiment. If it became known that Charlie had run in the face of battle, his career would be damaged as well.

He opened his eyes and stared upward at the stars. Surrender was not an option. Hiding or attempting to go home was not possible either. Where did that leave him? Lieutenant Bane stared up for a long time before he found his answer in the stars. It was not a perfect solution, but it was the best he could hope for. It was the only path that did not offer shame...he would have to complete his original mission.

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Charlie had no intention of a suicide run against the munitions plant at Gunster. His intent was to sweep in, destroy the facility and get out. If there was a strong defense, he would slug it out with them and punch-out before his BattleMech was destroyed. He might end up dispossessed, but his loyalty and honor would not be questioned when—if—he someday returned home. The stain of his flight from the last battle would be erased if he was successful. Dispossessed with dignity; that was how he mentally framed the idea.

There were many issues with his plan. Gunster was days away and the last time he was there the munitions plant was heavily defended. Taking out a munitions factory was no easy task. Large earthen berms divided the facility, each one very high and sloped. This helped contain industrial accidents. Where one or two buildings were destroyed, the blasts and fires would not easily spread to the other nearby structures. This meant that he would have to open fire on each part of the plant. Only by saturating the area with fire could he ensure that the facility would be destroyed.

Preventing that would be the defenders. It had been a lance of heavy and assault 'Mechs the last time he was there. The *Catapult* had been destroyed, but the others had survived. It was possible that they had assume that he had either been destroyed or evacuated with the rest of the Sirian Lancers; but that was not something he could rely on. The munitions plant was still a tempting target, especially given Ford's position along the border. Even if there wasn't a full lance of BattleMechs there, it was possible that there would be other defenders.

His *Dervish* was still in one piece, but had been damaged in the ambush. Charlie had taken a few hits to the upper torso and right side of the 'Mech. He'd fired off half of his long-range missiles, which worried him. A *Dervish* is a good close-support fighter, and once he ran out of LRMs, he would only be able to engage the enemy up-close and personal.

Charlie had spent hours looking over the terrain around Gunster on his tactical display, carefully studying his objective. Now that he'd seen the area first hand, he understood the subtlety of the terrain that the maps didn't reveal. His lance had come in along the main road leading towards the plant. There had been nothing subtle about the approach, nothing devious. The defenders had positioned themselves perfectly and wiped his force out. *This time I won't make the same mistake.*

Charlie allowed himself a wry grin at the thought. When the Lancers had come it had been a raid that was to surprise and stun the local militia on Ford. This time they probably didn't know he was still there, in an operational BattleMech. Their intelligence leak didn't know about Charlie either. *Maybe this time I can achieve real surprise.* The route he chose was long, curvaceous, and far from settlements. It would take a week to reach the point he planned to use to mount his attack. He only hoped that his *Dervish* held together long enough to get there.

Eight Days Later...

Charlie slid from his cover behind the boulder and looked out at the plant. Using his enhanced binoculars, he surveyed for heat sources and enlarged the images. The plant bristled with personnel and activity. The sight of people didn't surprise him, but it did unnerve him a little. If he was successful, many of them would be dead, victims of his attack. *No, not victims...simply dead Lyrans.*

He had left his *Dervish* in a small forest three kilometers away. As he surveyed the munitions plant he saw signs of the defense. Two Galleon tanks protected the main gate. The Galleons were light tanks but could still provide a nasty punch. He didn't see any BattleMechs, but assumed they had some nearby.

The key was getting close to the plant before being spotted. With all of the trees cleared around the facility, any direct approach would give the defenders plenty of warning. But, near the planet was the Cuyahoga River. A murky, fast-moving river, the plant tapped it as a source of cooling water. That was the key to his plan.

Charlie paused for a moment, lowering the binoculars. This was what he had planned a week ago. Now the question was would he have enough nerve to pull it off? Gulping in air, he tucked the binoculars in his haversack. Yes, it was time for him to redeem himself.

Making sure he hadn't been spotted, he withdrew and jogged back to his 'Mech. Settling into his command couch, he secured the safety harness and donned his neurohelmet, the coolant vest gurgling to life as he turned on the system. Looking around the cockpit, he wondered if this was indeed the last battle he would be fighting in the family's BattleMech. The centuries-old cockpit showed signs of age. There was the replacement targeting and tracking system his father had installed. The burn marks that had been painted over on the top of the canopy from a fight that his grandmother had survived. It was said that during the First Succession War, the entire cockpit had been replaced when his great-great grandfather had been killed during a battle with the Lyrans—the same people he was now facing. One more time the Bane family legacy was marching off against the enemies of the League.

The *Dervish* moved gingerly towards the bend in the river. The Cuyahoga was wide here, nearly three-quarters of a kilometer

across, and deep. He slowly walked into the water. In just a minute the river washed over the top of the cockpit glass. The murky liquid was so thick it was nearly impossible to see, so he relied on his tracking system to help guide him. Charlie fought the strong current and made his way, one slow plodding step at a time, upriver.

It took two long tedious hours to reach the edge of the plant complex. Fighting the constant push of the river with the controls made his arms and legs ache. He crossed the river bottom and from what he could tell, he was just about to break the surface. Charlie reached out and patted the main display once. "One more fight pretty lady—that's all I'm asking for." With those words he leaned back and throttled the 'Mech forward and up—out of the water.

It was obvious that the civilians and the defenders were stunned, but Charlie wasn't. He fired his medium lasers at the closest Galleon, hitting it on the flank. Long crimson beams cut a pair of nasty scars along the side of the tank. He stood knee-deep with the *Dervish* in the running brown river water, letting the river cool his 'Mech.

The tank he hit stayed still, the other one burst into movement, almost blindly, charging away. Charlie fired two salvos. One pair of short-range missiles aimed at the tank he'd already hit, the second pair into the factory complex itself. One of the SRMs plowed into the tank, the other blew up the guard shack. The pair fired at the factory hit buildings but he could see little results other than their wispy trails of smoke.

Charlie unleashed his long-range missiles at the Galleon making a break for it. The missiles twisted through the air and engulfed the tank's side and rear armor just as it began to turn. Armor plating flew off in all directions, but the tank was still in the fight. The first Galleon aimed one of its lasers at him, striking his *Dervish* in the right thigh. Steam rose from the water, a mix from the hit and from all of the weapons fire that he was unleashing.

Charlie danced the targeting reticule on the first Galleon and began to move up river slightly, straining against the current. He fired his lasers again. The hits were deep this time, burrowing deadly holes into the side of the light tank. The Galleon seemed to rock for a moment, obviously the result of some sort of internal blast. Smoke billowed out of every hatch as the crew abandoned it.

The other Galleon fired, but both of the shots missed by a mere meter or two. His sensors came to life as he detected another tar-

get, this one more dangerous—a BattleMech. The seventy-ton *Grasshopper* was a nasty battler. It was at the far end of the plant, but was already breaking into a full run around the edge of the factory complex.

He twisted his *Dervish* towards the last tank. The battered Galleon was still smoking from the rear as it turned to face him. Its lasers fired brilliant red beams at him, tearing at his torso armor. The *Dervish* sagged, fighting the current and the impact. Charlie let loose with a long-range missile salvo, then turned, firing another wave of missiles into the middle of the factory complex.

Most of the missiles hit the tank. Its left side turret caught the brunt of the blast and was so badly savaged it was left sagging, gouging the barrel into the ground as it drove. The driver stopped and tossed the tank into a bucking reverse.

The missiles aimed at the factory hit all over the complex. He saw a secondary blast in the distance; something vital had been hit. Charlie checked the *Grasshopper* on sensors and saw it closing in from the north, nearly at the edge of the plant.

He stopped fighting the current and turned back, towards the tank. To the tank driver this had to have looked like his worst nightmare. The *Dervish* came out of the water and fired short range missiles at it as the 'Mech broke into a charge right at it.

The missiles finished the tank, hitting the less-protected top of the vehicle, ripping holes into the armor. Flames emerged from one hole, then every hatch seemed to pop at once as the crew bailed. *Great!* Charlie rushed past it and turned to the south end of the plant just as the *Grasshopper* let loose with four of its medium lasers. Two of the lasers found their mark on the legs of his *Dervish*, searing off chunks of armor as they struck. The other two shots went high and wide. Charlie rounded the corner so that the building blocked another immediate attack.

Now that he was out of the water, the *Dervish* was running much hotter. He fought the heat and kept going. Charlie unleashed his short-range missiles as he ran. Buildings were hit and he could feel the blast of each explosion. He kept making his way at a full run past the front of the plant complex and then around the corner again.

The *Grasshopper* was not so forgiving. A wave of long range missiles streaked in the air, locking on him mid-flight, testimony to the skill of the MechWarrior. The missiles ate into the *Dervish's*

thin rear armor and nearly tumbled him face-forward. From his cockpit he saw a piece of his rear armor splay in the air overhead and land in front of him as he lost his stride.

At the corner of the plant's perimeter, he stopped and twisted his torso around forty-five degrees. Locking onto the *Grasshopper*, he let go with his long-range missile racks. He didn't wait to see if they found their mark, juking around the corner. There was as deep rumble like thunder as one of the buildings out of his field of vision exploded. *Good!* If nothing else, his raid had already been successful.

The *Grasshopper* fired regardless, hitting the building he was next to and spilling a grinding chunk of the brickwork into his *Dervish*. It didn't do much damage, but it surprised him. This MechWarrior was willing to risk hitting one of the buildings to stop him. It was an unnerving realization.

Time to up the ante. Charlie rounded the building and ran between the buildings, firing his lasers as he went, searing two more buildings. He was charging into the middle of the complex. *Let's see if he's willing to play on my terms.* In the tight quarters of the industrial complex every missed shot stood the chance of doing damage.

As he passed on building, a pair of medium lasers hit him on the side. The armor there was gone, and all that stopped the lasers was the long range missile rack. It was nothing more than melted slag now, that's what the damage display told him anyway.

Ahead was a large, five-story building. The moment he thought he had cover, Charlie fired a wave of long-range missiles into it. The structure half-crumbled towards him, flames bursting out of the interior. *Burn baby—burn!*

Another wave of long range missiles came in around him. Three hit his arms and back. Spinning, he saw the *Grasshopper* land nearby. Jump jets! *Damn.* He toggled his medium lasers and fired at it as it landed. One laser missed, hitting the building behind the Lyran BattleMech. The other hit it square in the chest armor. The massive 'Mech didn't even look as if it had felt the impact. The large laser in its torso fired back. This time the hit was devastating. Charlie felt a rumble in the bowels of the 'Mech as ammo cooked off, probably the last of his long-range missiles. His head felt as if he was cast into the bowels of the worst hangover he ever experienced—the nightmare of neuron-feedback from the internal blast. Nausea swept over him to the point where he popped the

faceplate open on his helmet in case he had to vomit. The feedback had dulled the violent shake and rattle from the hit, but his senses emerged from the haze of sickness as he regained control. The missile rack that remained went off-line as well, either from the laser hit or from the internal blast. Smoke rose from the torso of his 'Mech in front of the armored cockpit glass.

He ran around a corner to put the structure between him and the *Grasshopper*, using one of the earthen berms for partial cover as he moved. For the first time the *Dervish* seemed sluggish, as if it was fighting him. The engine was running hot, he didn't need a display to tell him that. The sauna all around him told him more than the readouts. The heat told him the internal damage had been bad, worse than he thought. Still, he kept going, pushing the old BattleMech further and harder. He fired short-range missiles into a pair of storage tanks. They went up in thunderous explosions, and burning fluid poured out. Alarms went off in the planet complex and he saw people running in every direction.

The *Grasshopper* rounded a corner and fired a snapshot with its medium lasers. Three hit, one blew up a car that was parked next to him. His leg armor bore the brunt of the assault. He lumbered his *Dervish* out of line of sight again and glanced at his damage display. The movement of his 'Mech was worse than ever. It moved as if it were drunk, half running, half staggering with each step.

He fired a pair of short range missiles off at a building that had a lot of pipes leading into and out of it. Flames roared up. It had to be driving the *Grasshopper* MechWarrior insane. He was not fighting him, he was trashing the plant instead. With his last round of SRMs he saw the heat indicator reach the redline. Time was running out. He slowed slightly as he ducked between two low buildings that only offered cover to his legs. The *Grasshopper* lined him up and fired his long range missile rack.

Whoever that is, they're good! The missiles hit on the right arm of the *Dervish*, blasting off the remains of the armor there. He looked over and saw only jagged strips of armor and exposed myomer bundles where the arm had once been. More importantly, the medium laser there was nothing but a blackened piece of scrap metal now. His short-range missile rack was still operative, but he doubted it would last very much longer. While the damage display still showed it as online, he knew it was gone. The sensor must have been fried as well.

This is almost over. His *Dervish* was dying around him. He passed the two low buildings and came to a large complex near the heart

of the munitions plant. Charlie stopped and switched his short-range missiles online. He fired them all at the building right in front of him. Shrapnel in the form of pieces of mortar and brick rained down on him.

The heat rose even further into the red zone and suddenly he heard a shudder as the fusion reactor tripped into shut-down mode. Target warning came into his ears as the *Grasshopper* moved into position for the killing shot to his rear. Lieutenant Charles "Charlie" Vincent Bane did something he swore he would never do. He reached out, grabbed the ejection bar, and pulled it towards him. There was a blast of cool air and a roar filled his ears. Disorientation overcame him and he remembered laughing right before everything went dark.

Dearborn City
The Eastern Expanses
Ford
Lyran Commonwealth
Two Days Later

Charlie sat in the chair and watched the interrogation officer pace back and forth on the far side of the table, like a cat waiting to pounce. "You caused quite a stir, Lieutenant," the man said in a thick Germanic accent, using the Lyran form of his rank. "Nothing we cannot repair, but you have taken the plant off-line for some time."

He wanted to smile, but held back. He didn't want to give this man any reason to punish him. His arm was in a cast from the ejection seat landing hard on the ferrocrete at the plant. His hair had been singed to the roots on his scalp, which supported a field dressing which still stung when he shifted in his seat. "I did my duty."

"The Third Sirian Lancers left this world weeks ago," the man replied coolly. "You claim to be one of them, but they left. So tell me, who are you and what unit are you with? Where are your comrades hiding? What are your mission objectives? Surely a minor munitions plant cannot be your only target, Herr Bane? Who is working with you? What other units are on Ford right now? I need a list of targets, Herr Bane!"

Charlie let go the urge to smile. The frustration of his interrogator gave him a sense of comfort. He rose in his seat and grinned broadly. "I told you already, I was with the Third Lancers. You want to go looking for my unit, go ahead, you won't find them."

"You were left behind to destroy that plant?"

"I was abandoned," he proclaimed proudly. "The destruction of that plant was the fulfillment of my mission. You can believe that if you want or not. I don't care."

"I find it hard to believe that such a skilled MechWarrior was abandoned. You must be lying," the man accused.

Lieutenant Bane smiled. That was the best compliment he could have hoped for.