

# Episode Two:

## Roll Call

*“The resistance movement, if that’s what one would call it, failed to make any significant contributions to Mars Division offensive. Some major reasons behind the resistance’s limited role in the Mars Fleet attack were for one, the near total lack of any communication between those on Earth and the fleet, and also the lack of any potency within the resistance movement. After I was forced down, I vowed I’d have that changed by the time another offensive was executed.”*

-From the memoirs of Admiral Michael Austin.

14 September 2042

The frigid morning wind took flight from the shadows of the forested Styrian alpine valley below and carried on its wings a warning of impending doom. And as the wind rushed in Milo Swift’s weathered face, he became aware of this nebulous sense of dread. He had heard rumors of the REF coming to reclaim the Earth from its alien landlords through various resistance networks - the most outlandish tale being that REF Marines had set down in huge numbers in distant South America around six months ago - but nothing was really credible.

*Today. It’s going to happen today.*

But Milo’s fighting days were well behind him now. He had destroyed his life and most of this destruction was due to senseless, futile wars - or from trying to profit from them. Now the disillusioned recluse was nothing but a spectator, if he was even that.

*Well, I’d better go secure the cave and check the traps, just in case,* Milo ruminated.

Milo shielded his eyes from the morning sun and scanned the panorama of the forest. All seemed quiet, but Milo’s instinct suggested strongly that this serenity wouldn’t last for long. He scurried back into the cave and grabbed a small backpack, into which he slipped a sheathed bowie knife. Checking his traps took the better part of the morning and yielded little bounty. He decided to check again at sundown.

Afterwards, Milo slid into his lawn chair, feeling another fit of depression coming

on. Was it the sense of loyalty that urged him to throw his expertise in with the resistance forces that had him feeling so disconsolate? After all, Milo couldn't deny that there would always be a part of him that loved to fight; an innate, primal desire to destroy that for all he knew had been encoded in his very genes. Some said it set him apart from the rest of mankind. But he thought such a trait insured his membership in the race he'd tried so hard to leave behind.

He stood up and stretched his long arms, feeling several vertebrae realign themselves in his spine. Milo loomed well over six feet tall and imposingly carried his two hundred and seventy pound frame. His hair, the color of gun metal, hung limply below the nape of his neck. His skin fell somewhere between well-tanned and light brown - one of the few features he'd inherited from the grandfather who raised him. His eyes reflected the shadowy canopy of the pine forest he inhabited. His face bore the scars of wars previously lost, and solemn wrinkles that exaggerated his age. Now, reflecting on the thirty-eight years Milo had inhabited this universe, he could find no reason to continue living. But he hadn't found any reason to give it up, either. That left him in this nowhere land, a beautiful forest that even the Invid had yet to violate with their presence. Milo lived off the land, and the remains of the hovertank he'd once piloted.

His abode was the cavity formed by the impact of his disabled mecha into the sloping facade of the tall hill. The protoculture generator had malfunctioned and was of no use to him, but the gutted frame of the mecha served as a support for the cave ceiling and partitioned off a small chamber that one might call a room. Milo's inventive mind had conjured up a crude distillery from the refrigeration unit aboard the hovertank. And the rot-gut liquor it produced fetched a decent price in Bruck, whenever he chose to give his solitude respite to barter booze for supplies and fuel cells.

And it was a near festive occasion when the notorious Mountain Guardian ventured into town for the feel of a woman's touch and the superficial warmth of human companionship. The retired mercenary's well-deserved reputation preceded him in that region: so much so that villagers would frequently leave tributes for him to keep the Invid away. What most of the superstitious townsfolk didn't know was even if he had the power to chase the Invid off, it's unlikely he'd have bothered to. Apparently, the Invid weren't interested in the village either, making the townsfolk's misunderstanding reasonable.

Milo languidly entered his shelter and emerged with a half-empty bottle of his homemade alcohol. He ripped out the stopper and drank a good quantity of the bourbon before easing back into his lawn chair. Milo found himself needing a stiff belt regularly to numb his guilty conscience and to convince himself that all his misfortunes were

unjustly levied upon him. He resigned himself to the conviction that his life would be better if he went down quietly. But no matter how hard he tried to douse that fire inside his breast, Milo couldn't ever drown it.

*Christine. . . You'll never know how much it hurt to watch you die. To watch all I ever wanted destroyed, and to be powerless to prevent it. I only wish I could hold you one more time.*

A rebellious tear slid down Milo's face, but before it could be followed by an onrush of sorrow, Milo noticed that the serenity of the forest's landscape had been tarnished by a black column of smoke descending from the heavens to the valley below. His keen eyesight was little good at this distance, so Milo darted inside his cave for a pair of high-powered binoculars. He concentrated on the contrail, and though he could barely make out the Alpha fighter, it was there, coming across the clear blue sky gliding to its resting place to the northwest. There were no parachutes visible, but Milo was dead sure that the pilot or pilots were trying to ride the plane to the ground. The plane disappeared amidst the green canopy of trees, with dark plumes of smoke rising up angrily into the afternoon sky.

"Mon dieu!" Milo cried as he stared at the plane. *Could be some survivors*, he thought. *Or if not, maybe some machinery I could use back here. Better hurry, though. Invid'll be by to check out the crash site*, Milo decided, as he hurriedly threw on some jeans and flannel shirt, and a black overcoat for the ride. He stamped out the stub of a cigarette under his heavy boot, checked the firearm in his holster, and mounted the VR-041F Cyclone parked at the base of the hill.

Milo started the engine, half aware that its protocluture emissions would lead the Invid to his destination, if they weren't already there. He revved the engine hard with an anticipation that he now found a bit uncomfortable.

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"I'd better break out that emergency vehicle," Michael groaned to his ruined Alpha and to Jeanne, who was silently looking on. He stared glumly at the smoking wreckage for a moment. It was like watching a good friend die slowly and painfully, but he couldn't remain in mourning too long.

He moved aside a battered panel beside a **NO STEP** sign and sequentially pressed a series of buttons. A larger panel slid back, and a cubic mechanism with two wheels jutting from its rear eased upwards toward Austin. He dragged the cumbersome device away from the wrecked Alpha to a clear spot and pressed a button on it, causing it to

promptly unfold into a motorcycle. Undoing a latch on a metallic box magnetically attached to the rear wheel cover of the VR-052 armored Cyclone, he extricated a bulky suit of battle armor, and happily discarded his old flight suit.

Michael's donning of the armor was interrupted by the noisy droning of another Cyclone engine nearing them. Michael had no trouble spotting the visitor, and from the looks of it, the rider was moving at breakneck speed. A wake of dust shot from the nearing Cyclone's rear tire, and it soon bolted into the perimeter of the smoking ruins of the Alpha fighter. The Cyclone skidded to a grinding halt inches from the pair.

The rider flung his helmet off and scrutinized the couple. Her uniform and his armor were variants of those he'd seen worn by the 3rd REF Planetary Corps, which had arrived to bolster Earth's forces just before the end of the Second Robotech War. The presence of a downed Alpha fighter further suggested that the pair was indeed a part of a REF offensive.

The male was a physically impressive specimen, and his lively eyes sparkled with a confidence and friendliness that eased Milo's suspicions. The man looked a bit drained, but all in all, seemed unscathed from the forced landing. Milo looked closely at the markings on his battle armor's shoulders, and although he knew little of how rank insignia went in the REF Navy, it appeared the fighter pilot before him was up in the brass, maybe an O-4 or O-5. His eye wandered to the side of the plane's cockpit; he couldn't even begin to count the kill-markers painted there. This man was definitely an ace.

The girl was a bit more banged up. A head bandage did little to conceal the gashes on her forehead, although they appeared to control the bleeding. She also sported various other bumps and bruises. Nor did her beauty escape Milo's trained eye.

"Anybody hurt?" Milo demanded. He turned his gaze to Jeanne, who shifted nervously under his watch.

"Well, she's a little scratched up, but we're fine. Thanks anyway." Michael extended his hand, and waited for the stranger to take it up. Milo took it up hesitantly, and shook it lightly, noting the strength of Austin's vise-like grip.

"I'm Commander Michael Austin, 8th Naval Air Group, Mars Fleet, REF. This is Lt. Jeanne Ducasse, defense coordinator of the battlecruiser *Valiant*. Our fleet was dispatched as a forward offensive against the Invid. It was. . . destroyed in low orbit. We barely made it out alive."

*Yeah, yeah, yeah. This isn't a social call. I'd better get these war babies away from here,* Milo decided. "Follow me, if you want stay that way."

"Right. I'll set the self-destruct on the plane for a fifteen minute delay." Michael

pressed a series of buttons on a panel to the right of the pilot's seat, and quickly grabbed his survival gear and the sack of memorabilia stowed in the rear of the cockpit. He stashed it into the storage compartments of the readied vehicle, and helped Jeanne on the rear of the seat. "Let's move," he shouted before taking off after Milo's Cyclone.

The pair of Cyclone riders soon came upon the secluded site of Milo's cave. Michael examined the skeletal remains of the hovertank that had lanced the side of the hill, and the sheltered lean-to at the entrance to the shallow cave that seemed to have swallowed this mecha. He wondered if Jeanne and he would have been better off staying with the Alpha.

They parked at the base of the hill, and negotiated the small inclining ledge that led to the entrance. It was here that Milo deemed it necessary to part their company for a short while.

"I've got to check on dinner, so make yourselves at home. I'll be back soon," Milo informed them tersely, before bounding down the ledge and entering the thick forest.

*Nice guy*, Michael glumly thought.

Michael and Jeanne cased the place. It was apparent that the hovertank mecha couldn't be repaired. Most of its important components lay in stacks of machinery around the unnatural shelter. The only interesting apparatus was the purring distillery, which took Michael the better part of three minutes to scrutinize. The hollow interior of the hovertank served as a room of sorts. Jeanne immediately went for a swaying rope hammock and was soon rocked into a light slumber.

Michael wasn't done with his room search. On the wall opposite the hammock was a dusty shelf with numerous odds and ends scattered haphazardly on its wooden planks. On one end of this shelf was a tarnished silver picture frame, face down. Michael turned it over, and through the cracked glass of its other side, he marveled at the blonde-haired, green eyed beauty that was caged in this glass-and-metal prison. In the lower right-hand corner of the picture was written: "I'm yours forever, Milo. . . Christine".

Michael returned the frame to its original position, and moved onto the room's other offerings. A rusty metal storage box groaned when Michael dragged it from its resting place. He opened it with a moderate amount of anticipation; however, the box held nothing but an outdated yet clean Southern Cross enlisted man's uniform; the name-tag read "Swift", and the insignia was for a private in the Alpha Tactical Armored Corps, the elite front-line units of the Southern Cross. Michael carefully refolded the uniform and set it back into place and then turned his attentions to the wounded girl that slept peacefully nearby.

“What a dump! First the Invid and now this. When she recovers, first thing I’m doing is getting us to a town, any town,” he murmured with determination.

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Four Armored Scouts stalked through the thick native vegetation, tracking down fading protoculture emissions from stationary Robotech mecha positioned about fifteen hundred meters due west of the Invid assault force.

The leader of the quartet had first picked up the emissions from a close fly-by over the smoking wreck of a downed fighter from the invading REF forces. After submitting a detailed report to the regional hive, the Armored Scout was given three subordinates and ordered to seek and destroy the rebels, detected by the tell-tale sign of the protoculture emissions heading away from the craft. A quick and efficient victory might even be rewarded with a higher position in the Invid hierarchy.

The lead trooper’s appetite for battle was whetted with anticipation, so much so that she was careless, in not picking up the lone human following them as they made their way through the thicket, towards the hill. Once she had breached the clearing before the hill, and glanced at the two Cyclones, she formulated her tactics.

*This is the source of the protoculture emissions. Units two and four, concentrate fire on the aperture; prevent the rebels from reaching their mecha. Unit three, we will destroy the Robotech mecha. Eliminate all resistance,* the leader telepathically goaded the other three.

The twelve foot tall bipedal war machines straightened up. The crustacean-like vehicles were similar to the ones that fought the REF in space, but they lacked the bulbous booster pack and sported two over-sized hydraulically driven legs. *Prepare to fire,* the leader commanded, as the two lethal plasma cannons atop each began to glow.

The Invid weren’t the only ones ready for a fight. Michael had heard their approach, and roused Jeanne.

While attaching a collimating barrel and powered stock to his Gallant particle gun, for the extra punch needed to penetrate even the weaker portions of the Invid Scouts’ armor, Michael shouted out to Jeanne, “How the hell did they find us?”

“I don’t know,” Jeanne replied. “If they saw us by the fighter, why didn’t they attack then?”

Peering from a hole in the wall of Milo’s shelter, Austin waited until he had a clear shot of one of the targets’ vulnerable optics suites, aimed, and pulled the trigger.

A flash burst from Michael’s gun, lancing the metallic sensor sphere and

overpenetrating into the pilot's compartment. The Invid pilot's snail-like head exploded as the beam evaporated the tissue it pierced, and its mecha sprayed a green mix of Invid blood and nutrient fluid before collapsing backwards and falling to the ground. Michael shouted in triumph, and took cover.

The surviving three Invid then began to shower the shelter walls with annihilation discs, causing the cave to shake violently. Thick columns of dust descended from the cave ceiling, and Michael and Jeanne were soon covered by a layer of dirt and small debris.

"Over here!" Milo shouted at the Invid from the tree-line. He steadied his laser pistol and fired, briefly drawing their attention away from his home. One of the Invid turned toward him, and the cannons atop it again began to glow. Milo fired at the mecha's weak spot, and the Invid trooper collapsed, oozing green fluid through the shattered eye. Seeing their comrade fall, the two other Invid turned and began to unleash a hailstorm of plasma disks at the retreating Swift.

"This is crazy!" Milo exclaimed as he strode back toward the dark forest under an intense bombardment, weaving his way between the incessant explosions. *Why do I want to get myself killed over such crummy odds?* he asked himself.

Back in the cave, Michael tossed Jeanne his rifle. "Cover me while I try to make it to my Cyclone," he ordered. Jeanne nodded, checked the beam gun's power level, and looked out a crack in the wall for targets, while Michael dashed out the entrance to the cave to his Cyclone, parked at the base of the hill.

Michael hurriedly strapped on his battle armor, relieved to see that the aliens had failed in their attempts to kill the stranger that had given them shelter. He glanced back at the Hovertank. Jeanne's fire had drawn one of the mecha's attention back to the cave, and she had come under heavy fire. Swearing, he hopped on the Cyclone and conjured it to life.

Swift had found himself pinned down on the edge of the forest; neither he nor the Invid harrying him could get a clear shot at the other, and tree trunks splintered and caught flame in the cross-fire. Volley after volley was exchanged to no avail.

Jeanne's fire-fight was just as intense; she and the other remaining Armored Scout were practically ionizing the air with the intensity of their exchange. Jeanne felt a sudden tremor - the thick wall of the hovel, made from the Hovertank's thick armor, had finally given way under the relentless pounding of the Invid weapons. Milo's whiskey-still toppled over in the blast, spilling distilled alcohol and the fuel oil that ran the still all over the floor. Jeanne saw the potential for disaster and began to run for the entrance, but a second shot from the Invid ignited the volatile liquids, and the place went up in a

tremendous explosion, catapulting Jeanne out of the shelter and throwing her hard to the ground outside.

Milo gaped in horror as he watched his home blow into pieces. A fireball roared out of the cave, and subsided just as quickly as it had appeared. Just as the dust was about to settle, Michael burst onto the scene from around the back of the hill. Milo found himself watching a miraculous transformation, and smiled in grim satisfaction. The armored rider and his Cyclone accelerated toward the remaining pair of Invid crab-like mecha, when he saw Michael's motorcycle suddenly transform around Michael's body into a small battlesuit. Milo let out a gruff cheer, and hit the ground for cover.

*This one's for Valiant*, Michael thought as he leveled his right arm and watched two Scorpion mini-missiles rocket forth from the forearm launchers. Only the charred husk of the Armored Scout remained after Michael's first salvo found its mark.

The sole Invid Armored Scout, realizing that the tide of battle was going against it, chose to flee and possibly bring back reinforcements to subdue these persistent rebels. And it probably would have done just that had not another onslaught of missiles pinned it on the ground, dismembering one of its huge legs and disabling its main thruster.

It was forced to fight, damaged as it was. Propped on an arm and its remaining leg, the Invid Scout lashed out with return fire of plasma globes, plowing into the hillside behind Michael. As he elevated the Cyclone away from the debris, Michael caught the full fury of a round with the emptied launcher on his armored left wheel cover, blowing it to tiny molten fragments.

*Got careless*, Michael realized. The blast had heated up his forearm armor considerably, and he winced in pain as he popped the quick-release button and shed the unit. But he wouldn't let himself be careless twice. He took up the Cyclone's 60mm beam cannon from its mounting point on the shoulder, and easily dispatched the last Invid mecha.

Only well after the smoke sifted away from the recent scene of battle did Milo finally emerge from the shelter he'd found behind a thick-trunked pine. Austin had already run to Jeanne's side, and was tending to both her new and old wounds, when he saw Milo scurry up the ledge to his shattered home.

"Michael. . ." Jeanne was coming to. She tossed uneasily in his arms, as if she was having some vague nightmare. Her eyes barely opened and she offered up a strained smile to her concerned C.O.

"Don't try and exert yourself, Jeanne. You took a nasty blow on your head. Ran out of bandages for all the scrapes you've got, but don't worry. I'll come up with something." And as Michael continued to assure Jeanne that they'd be all right, that in

the morning the both of them would journey into the nearest town, Jeanne shut her eyes, her body exhausted from the events of the day.

Milo shuffled out of the cave with a discouraged look painted across his grizzled features. He was still a bit dazed by it all, and he barely managed to stagger down the ledge without falling. After Milo negotiated the tricky descent, he went over to Austin's motorcycle, and began to examine it closely, displaying a look of admiration for the machine before him.

"Damned impressive machine. Pity I can't manage to get mine to transform," he told Michael. "I've been trying for years, and no go."

"Tell you what; I'll take a look at it for you if you help me move my friend here." Michael said convincingly as he motioned to Jeanne.

"Better move your wheels as well; the Invid might be knockin' on what's left of my door pretty soon," Milo suggested, as they carried Jeanne's form into the neighboring forest.

There was lots of work to be done before the sun went down. Michael moved both of the Cyclones to the campsite they made a mile deep into the forest. He also gathered firewood, and lit up a blaze to keep them warm through the night ahead. Milo went back to his home to scavenge all he could. This included several blankets, some of Milo's clothes, including his old Southern Cross uniform, a few bottles of his homemade liquor, and his revered harmonica. Milo checked the traps once more, and came back with dinner. Then, while watching the meat broil in the flames, Milo tended to Jeanne.

"What do you think you're doing?" Michael accused. He glared angrily at Milo.

"Helping your friend. Now, shut up, Austin," Milo responded abruptly. He placed a covering of some gray filmy substance in the girl's wounds, undoing all of the field dressings that needed replacing. The spider webs soaked up all of the smeared blood, and allowed clotting to set in.

"Ever wonder why a spider is able to save its kills? Its webs keep the spoils of the hunt edible, by locking in the internal juices," Milo explained.

"Spider webs!" Michael had heard of spiders, but had never seen one before.

"Hasn't failed me yet; now make yourself useful, and hand me that bag," Milo ordered.

"Amazing. . ." Michael gawked, appraising Milo's handiwork. Milo slid a couple of roots into Jeanne's mouth, and propped her head up on a rolled up blanket, while covering her form with another.

"That'll get her through the night, unless, of course, you have any objections, Sir," Milo intoned sarcastically.

“Look, I’ve had about enough of your attitude, mister!” Michael countered.

“Well, maybe I should thank you for leading the Invid to my doorstep and having them shoot up my home!” Milo screamed. “It’s not often I get company, but I certainly could have done without theirs. Next time you crash, I’ll make sure that I’m as far away as possible.”

“Well, sorry about that. . . But that doesn’t give you the right to treat us like garbage. For crying out loud, you haven’t even told me your name.”

“You’re REF. You’d better get used to the idea of being treated like garbage. Because a lot of people don’t want your kind here. As far as a lot of us concerned, you people are responsible for letting the Invid take over in the first place, and now you’re back to stir up trouble. And as for my name, you never asked.”

“Well?” Michael prodded, “I’m asking now.”

The tall quadroon snorted. “I’m Milo - Milo Swift. Now let’s eat, before dinner gets cold.”

All through dinner, a mixture of fresh hare and venison Milo had smoked earlier, Milo stared forlornly at the fire. He hardly touched his meal. His diet was mostly liquid by now; he had completely drained the bottle.

“So exactly what do you do out here?” Michael inquired between bites. He looked up at the stranger, awaiting some kind of response.

“Oh, I just hang out. Don’t do much. Get drunk, get sober, and then get drunk again.” Milo raised the bottle to his lips. “It’s a living.”

“Doesn’t sound very productive.”

“Who can be productive in a world like this? What’s left of it, that is. Besides, what I used to like to do for a living had a limited clientele. And I left that kind of life behind. Been relatively good for three years.” Milo raised the bottle to Michael in a silent toast.

“You’re not ex-resistance, are you?” Michael pondered.

Milo swallowed, and looked at Michael with hostile eyes. “Well, I guess the answer is both yes and no. What’s it to you?”

“I was hoping to link up with the resistance forces against the Invid. And if you were resistance. . .” Michael trailed off.

“That’s a laugh. There aren’t any real resistance forces anymore; Invid took care of that a few years ago. Now, most people don’t care if the Invid continue ruling; they’re too worried about surviving from day to day,” Milo explained. “Present company included.”

“Hmm. . . Well, I’m afraid my job description doesn’t leave me much choice in

the matter. So if you would kindly tell me just where we are on this God-forsaken mud-ball, Lt. Ducasse and I will make tracks for the nearest town in the morning. And we'll be out of your life for good, Swift."

Milo informed him of the lack of any possibility of finding help in the nearest inhabited town: Bruck an der Murz. With that in mind, Michael had decided on not including it in his search for soldiers to join him. Its stock consisted of poor farmers now, and were not likely to be the kind of men he needed. Michael stored this away conclusion and concentrated on the stranger with him.

"I noted that you have a Southern Cross uniform. Is it yours, or does it belong to a relative?"

Milo was taken off guard, but after a moment of contemplation, his surprise mounted into silent annoyance. "It's mine."

"So you are in the 'Cross, Private Swift." Michael straightened up. Milo secretly wondered if the Commander expected some sort of salute.

"No, there isn't any Southern Cross left, Austin. Now, how can I be a good little soldier boy when there are no fat smug generals to bravely sacrifice my life for me?" Milo challenged.

Michael sighed disconsolately at the man keeping him company by the dwindling fire. He couldn't help feeling sorry for his obnoxious associate. But entwined with that pity was an equal amount of fury directed at Milo. What was it about Swift that angered Austin? Was it his casual disregard for everything around him, or was it the way Swift was quick to complain, but slow to try to change what he could? Michael couldn't pinpoint it, but whatever it was, he despised it. He was comforted in the fact that he didn't have to talk to Swift for the rest of his stay.

Milo was snoring soundly to the crackle of a flashing fire when Austin glanced his way one last time. Michael rolled over on his side, and dragged the blanket up to his shoulders. Hopefully, the last twenty-four hours would not be reenacted in his dreams.

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"Umm. . . What smells so good?" Jeanne demanded as she crawled out into the sunlight.

"Last night's dinner. It'll be a while before it's warm again. So, how are you doing?" Michael asked, stirring the coals of the small fire with a long stick.

"I've been better. I'm starving, I smell as bad as a wild trahl, my leg and forehead feel like hell, and I'm stiff as a board, not necessarily in that order. So for starters, would

you give me a back rub before I eat?”

“Of course. They didn’t call me magic fingers for no reason,” Michael explained as he massaged the kink from Jeanne’s back.

*Yeah, I know all about your reputation,* Jeanne reminded herself.

“There’s a stream about a five minutes walk to the west of here, if you want to wash up. The water’s nice, if a tad chilly,” Michael promised.

“Would you mind keeping it quiet around here. People are trying to get some sleep,” Milo groaned.

*Well, well, sleeping beauty has arisen,* Michael mused.

“When are you people leaving, anyway?” Milo inquired, as he snuggled back under his blanket.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be out of your hair soon enough. Just go back to sleep and when you wake up, we won’t be here,” Michael said in disgust.

Milo snorted before dozing off. He was hoping to sleep off the hangover he’d acquired from last night.

Michael packed up all his gear, and had begun to break camp when Jeanne returned, seemingly refreshed from her morning constitutional. Michael checked, cleaned, and rebandaged her wounds, while she sat, silently enduring the pain and discomfort.

“Breakfast ready yet?” Jeanne queried. Michael motioned to the food placed on a tray. *Great! It’s perfect.* Jeanne hungrily devoured the fare, leaving Michael to handle the rest of the chores.

“What about him?” Jeanne asked Austin, crinkling her brow in Milo’s direction. She moved closer to Swift, who was snoring noticeably.

“What about him?! He wants to stay.”

“I don’t know about you, but if I were going to lead a resistance outfit I’d jump at the opportunity to recruit someone like him. He’s Southern Cross material. His hovertank shows that he must have some familiarity with mecha, and he can obviously handle a gun. He knows the area, and he’s got decent wilderness survival skills. And we can’t get too picky with the help we scrape up,” Jeanne explained, looking intently at the hibernating Swift.

“I don’t know. I seriously don’t think he can handle something like a Cyclone. He drinks too much. He’s got an attitude, and no regard for rank,” Michael contradicted.

“You’ve seen worse. You’ve commanded worse. Shouldn’t be too hard for a bad-ass, no-nonsense officer like yourself to whip this lout into shape,” Jeanne wheedled, trying to appeal to Michael’s ego.

“Shit, Jeanne, I’m a CAG officer, not a drill instructor,” Michael responded, frustrated. “When I get people, they’re already well-trained, well-disciplined, and well-motivated. I don’t want to try to baby-sit this grunt!” Michael paused, and paced around the campsite for a few moments. “Hell, what’ve I got to lose? Now, how are you feeling now?”

“Not bad, Michael. I actually slept well for the first time in several nights. Was that your doing?”

“No, our mutual friend resorted to his bag of tricks. At first, I was a tad skeptical of his backwoods M.D., but then again most of our drugs are derived from plants like these. Just don’t ask about the spider webs.”

“It worked, didn’t it?” Milo’s voice erupted from under the folds of his blanket. After several moments of tossing and turning, he crawled out, stretched his arms, and rubbed his eyes.

“How long have you been awake?” Jeanne grilled him.

“Long enough to hear everything.” Milo started off to the river, shielding his eyes from the intense sun. As his figure was engulfed by the surrounding forest, he whistled the tune to an old child’s tune, interjected with the sole verse: “Pop goes the migraine”.

“Well, are you going to join us or not?” Austin yelled at the expanse of trees before him.

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Bruck an der Murz was soon only a passing memory in the mind of Commander Michael Austin by the time he lead their motorcycles into what was left of the city of Vienna. Beautiful streets and magnificent churches had once abounded in the hub of central Europe, but what they now beheld was more like a refugee camp. All the grandeur of the city had been incinerated during the first Robotech war by the powerful Zentraedi reflex cannons. The remainder was now an immense slum, much like many gang-ruled towns on the war-devastated planet. Caught between the pro-Invid regime in Hungary, and the gang warfare in Bavaria, what was left of Austria was made into a no-man’s land.

Malnourished children frequently met the gaze of the three riders only to scurry for safety as the motorcycles darted by. Occasionally, the trio viewed clots of refugees in front of dilapidated shanties frittering away time. Only Milo was consciously aware of the suspicious gazes that followed them as they weaved deeper into the debris-filled network of streets.

*What a damned shame.* Milo silently mourned for the people here as the

motorcycles escaped the inner city. It was now a three mile radius crater with a shanty town deposited in the hole in the ground. The threesome cleared the rim of the crater. Austin searched for a suitable inn to stay the night.

“Right. First order of business is to find someone to fix our Cyclones,” Austin announced. Michael eased his motorcycle to a halt in front of an innocuous-looking wooden inn.

“I think I have a lead for you. But I hope you children have the money, ‘cause I’m broke,” Milo informed the others.

Michael nodded. “Some gold from my plane’s survival pack.”

“Good,” Milo snorted. “Commander, if you’ll go in there and stake us out some rooms, I’ll secure the mecha for the night. Can’t be too careful in this city.”

Milo watched Austin and Ducasse disappear into the building. He dragged the cycles around back and hid them under some rubble against the wall, and set up two shaped-charge antipersonnel mines facing away from the bikes, the same sentry system he used on his own hovel while away. *There. Anyone messes with these babies, and he’s in for a rude surprise.*

“Please! Please! I didn’t see anything!” a frightened voice cried in German from the dark alleyway nearby. Milo heard it and moved closer to get a better look.

In the darkness, Milo perceived a scrawny brat, much taller than the child he was hassling, grab the quivering boy by his collar. The attacker was flanked by two adolescent hulks. They remained motionless and silent and seemed content to let the leader bully the youngster.

“That doesn’t matter. . .” he snarled as he whipped out a switchblade, “Let’s find out how much you’ll talk when I take your tongue out!”

Milo caught most of the dialogue and decided to take matters into his own hands. He stepped out to face the gang, grumbling in their native tongue, “Didn’t your momma tell you not to play with knives?”

“What! Look, you’d better just walk away, and maybe we won’t come after you, stranger,” the gang leader challenged in an broken voice. He forced the boy down to the hard ground. The child wriggled away to safety.

“You guys better have more than just those little things if you want to take me.” Milo’s warning was immediately followed by a thundering punch at the diminutive leader. His punch catapulted the victim into the arms of the other two.

“Man, let’s teach Grandpa here who runs this town!” The gang advanced, revealing their weapons. The fracas would have to be confined to the not-so-fine arts of bludgeoning and knife fighting. That suited Milo just fine.

The two muscle men converged around Swift. They were large brutes, but Milo still had a good three inches on the tallest of the lot. Milo inhaled deeply and shifted the weight of his body to the balls of his feet.

He reacted well to the knife thrown his way. And although he'd stepped out of harm's reach, Milo drifted straight into a punch meant for his jaw, and barely managed to roll with the impact. He'd lost his bearings and glanced around with quiet desperation. From his blind side, Milo heard the heavy grating of metal on metal. A sturdy length chain wrapped itself around Milo's forearm. They'd done quite a bit the first time around. Now they'd try to go for the kill.

So far the fight had been one-sided, but Milo was ready to rectify that situation. He yanked heartily at the chain, hoisting himself to his feet. With a single kick, he smashed the jaw of a second boy, and then Milo swung his chained arm around, slamming one of the others into the wall of a near-by building. Milo wrapped the chain around its wielder's neck and drove the bulbous skull into wall several times until he heard a crack; the dim light shielded Milo's eyes from seeing the hideous graffiti of blood the thug left there.

The knife slash cutting deeply into his shoulder served as a painful reminder to him that his work was not done. Milo extricated his arm from the chain, and eyeballed the lone attacker. The boy lunged with his knife again, but failed to connect. Swift grabbed the forearm, and stripped it of the knife. He wrenched the leader's arm around and slung him to the ground like a sack of grain. From there, it was a simple task to beat his attacker senseless.

"Now, you boys better be good, or I might have to oblige you again!" Milo snarled at the stunned leader who lay groaning on the ground. Milo left him with a kick to the abdomen.

The child tugged at Milo's arm, the one attached to his wounded shoulder. Milo wheeled around and almost decked the kid out of instinct. He was still jumpy.

"Is there anything I can do to repay you?" the boy whined.

"Who. . . who were those scum?" Milo gasped. He'd started back to the inn, and the boy clung to his side.

"Local trash; they work for Rimmler in Neumünchen. They tip off the Invid about local resistance groups and loyalists from the Alliance in exchange for protoculture. I caught them doing it, so they wanted me out of the way."

"You're a brave kid."

"Thanks, Mister. But still, you saved my life. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

“Ever hear of a Roger Pike?”

\* \* \*

As they drove through the streets of the burnt-out city, Milo’s mind was reeling with the instructions on piloting the Cyclone armor Michael had given him. *It’s not that different from a hovertank. BA switch for transformation, a retinal sensor in the helmet for target selection and to open up and close the targetscope and to fire the on-board weapons. The jets are directed and missiles launched by voice command. Seemed easy enough. And with the jet boosters, the pilot is freed of the ground somewhat, and even jumps over thirty feet were not unheard of. A nice machine, and a lot more versatile those clunky old Veritech Hovertanks. Now all I got to do is get it to work.*

“Here we are,” the boy answered. A gigantic forty-five foot-long hovertransport was parked next to a shop which was burdened with the bilingual sign: Pikes Reparierhandlung - Pike’s Repairs.

“Herr Pike,” cried the boy. “There are some people here who want to see you! They’re REF-soldiers.” He waited for a moment more, and then called out again. “*Herr Pike? Ich denke daß sie zum Widerstand gehören. Machen Sie schnell, bitte!*”

A gruff voice emerged from the building, saying, “*Ruhe, Jakob!* Do you want everyone in the neighborhood to hear?” A medium-sized, brown-haired man in his mid-forties stepped out of the repair shop, his face showing the signs of age, his vast mop of hair beginning to thin. A sudden flash of recognition on Swift’s face told Jeanne that, somehow, Milo had met the man before. But Milo failed to smile when the trim man began to speak, his richly Austrian accent instantly metamorphosing into a pleasant Southern drawl. “Hello, Swift. Been keeping out of trouble?”

“Not any more than usual, Captain,” Milo replied.

The man smiled at the remainder of the group, and announced, “Howdy, I’m Captain Roger Pike, 18th ATAC, Southern Cross. Jakob tells me you’re resistance. Well, come on in.” Roger turned to the boy and admonished him in German. “Jakob, your mother’s been worried sick about you. Get home right now, *du Lump!*”

“*Wiederseh’n,*” cried the boy as he dashed home.

“*Tschüs, Jakob.*” Pike waved.

Once inside the shop, Pike had all the others sit around a small wooden table, and introduce themselves. While Jeanne and Roger were exchanging pleasantries, Michael leaned over to Milo, and asked, “I gather you know this guy.”

“I served under him in the Southern Cross. Twice, actually. I was in his unit when

the E.B.S.I.S. attacked, and then when the Invid invaded.” Milo turned to his former commander, “I heard you were still around. What happened to the unit?”

“The rest of the company fought on until we were massacred at Prague. Our-”

“Look, I hate to interrupt up this reunion,” Michael cut in, “but I’ve got business with you, Captain Pike. I’ve got a damaged GR-97 missile launcher that isn’t getting any younger, as well as a demolished front wheel cover, for the Battler type. Milo’s got a Blowsperior-type Cyclone with what looks to be a burned-out transformation circuit. While I’m at it, I’d like you to find a Cyclone for Jeanne, if that’s possible.”

“I’ll see to the damage on yours - could probably fix it tonight. If your guess is right about the Blowsperior’s damage, I can have that fixed in twenty minutes, but then I have to calibrate it for Swift’s height and build. I’ve also got a damaged VR-038T Bartley Cyclone, complete with CVR-3F armor and an EP-40 particle cannon. But it’s in terrible shape, and I’ve got a way to go before it is in working condition,” Roger explained. “Picked it up off of a scavenger who-”

“Great!” Jeanne interjected shrilly. She wouldn’t be left out of any of the action in the future.

“With your Southern Cross combat experience, and all, and the fact that you’re going to help us without question give me the feeling you’ve no love for our landlords. . . So why aren’t you in the resistance, Pike?” Michael asked.

“Who says I’m not?” Roger asked.

“Your settled lifestyle does,” Michael replied.

Roger laughed. “I never was a good fighter. I was really a mecha engineer - my support company was rated most efficient in the corps. But as the war against the Robotech Masters dragged on, and after it was over, command yanked all the officers they could spare and put them into squadrons with little more than raw recruits. After my Hovertank company was finally defeated by the Invid, I wandered for a bit, and decided to stay away from fighting for a while. Besides, I do my part. I’m always on the look-out for mecha I can recondition and pass on to you people. Resistance fighters sneak their equipment in here, and I discretely fix it, no questions asked, no fee charged. And when you settle in one place for long, you can’t let your sympathies be known, or one night you’ll just suddenly disappear. So I front as a humble repairman, fixing whatever bits of technology the people around here still have: portable generators, tractors, whatever.”

“How would you like to join up with us? We could use an technician for the hardware we have, and if we manage to acquire more.”

“Well, my first instinct is to say no. But Rimmmler’s people have been snooping around a lot, and I think they may suspect I’m fixing mecha for the resistance. And my

meeting with you won't help any. Your visit may have made me a marked man."

"I could order you," Michael added.

"But you won't. I can see that about you." Roger stood up, and began to pace about the shop. "All right. You want a mecha engineer? You got a mecha engineer. But I have three rules. First, no one touches the mecha without my permission. I like fixing things right, and I don't like fixing things twice."

"I don't have a problem with that."

"Second, no banditry. I know even having to say it may sound offensive, but you wouldn't believe how many self-proclaimed resistance fighters oppress the people as badly as the Invid do. If we get supplies from the locals, we pay for them, in gold or in trade."

"No quarrel here."

"Third, if I decide I want out, you'll let me go without a fight. Okay?" Michael nodded. "Good. Do I have the job?"

"You're hired, Pike." Michael extended his hand to congratulate the newest member.

"Great! I'll pack up, and we can leave tomorrow," Roger promised.

The trio shook hands with Pike and parted his company. The sooner Pike got started on the repair work, the better. Pike disappeared back into the back of his workshop to begin.

"That was almost too easy," Michael said.

Milo shook his head. "He's on the level. I can vouch for him, whatever my word's worth to you. I've heard more about his activities during the occupation than he knows, and I had a hunch he was just looking for an excuse to get back into the thick of things. Pike just has a way of getting dragged out of his comfortable garage. He's just stopped fighting it."

"If you say so," Michael responded. Once within the environs of the quaint inn, Michael announced to his companions that he'd be turning in for the evening, and recommended that they did the same. If Swift hadn't known better, he would have sworn that Austin had just issued him an order.

"Join me for a drink," Milo begged Jeanne.

"I'm not thirsty. But I will keep you company for a bit," Jeanne offered softly. Jeanne and Milo descended slowly and selected a small table in the small restaurant on the inn's ground floor. Milo poured himself a stiff one and gulped it down in one huge swallow.

"What do you think of our new recruit?" Jeanne settled back in her chair. Her

hands nervously fondled the silverware placed on the table.

“Maybe it’s best to formulate your own opinions on the man.”

Jeanne shrugged her shoulders and, changing the subject, said, “Michael told me that you ran into a little trouble last night. Is that shoulder injury a souvenir?”

Milo downed another glass. He blinked his eyes and cleared his throat. “Nothing a little time off can’t mend.”

Milo began to ramble about his past, and Jeanne listened attentively, occasionally pausing to straighten out her flowing hair or to check the time on her digital chronometer. In the next few hours, he covered bleary memories of his days as a hovertank pilot in the Alpha Tactical Armored Corps and a brief stint with the GMP, through his period as a mercenary and his involvement with the resistance against the occupation, to his present status as a melancholic recluse. As the narrative progressed chronologically, Jeanne noticed that Milo’s stories were becoming more incoherent and vague, but whether this was due to the alcohol or to something else, she wouldn’t speculate. She lamented the fact that Milo did not mention his reasons for joining her and Austin. By the time she found the courage to ask, she was disappointed to discover that Milo’s reply made little sense.

“I think you’d better get some sleep,” Jeanne announced, hoping to coerce Milo to turn in for the night. She tried to stifle a yawn, but it nevertheless emerged from behind her closed fist.

“I’m going to stay down here a little longer.” Milo shakily poured the last contents of the bottle he’d brought with him into the shot glass the bartender had provided. Jeanne frowned as she walked out of the restaurant. Milo’s squinting eyes trailed Jeanne up the stairs that adjoined the dimly lit lobby, and he sat inertly in his chair, staring blankly at the wall front of him until sleep’s oblivion replaced the bottle’s.

\* \* \*

The promising sunshine of a bright, crisp morning greeted a refreshed Michael Austin. He dressed as quietly as possible in order not to disturb his slumbering roommate. Austin had decided the previous night to head on over to Pike’s repair shop early so he might help with repairs and start packing away some of Pike’s belongings for the trip ahead.

He cast a parting glance at Swift. Austin had gone downstairs last night at midnight to check on his Dionysian companion, and when he caught sight of Milo slumped over, face down on the table, Michael smugly carried the bulky Swift back to

the room they were sharing. He had been compassionate enough to throw a blanket over Milo's snoring form before returning to his own bed. Austin quietly shut the door on his way out.

He strolled by the room in which Jeanne had slept, and stopped to knock. "Anybody up?"

"Yeah, come on in, Michael." Jeanne chirped cheerfully. Michael was relieved that he hadn't woken her up.

As he stepped inside, Michael saw Jeanne's slender form enveloped in a navy blue teri-cloth towel.

"Morning, Jeanne. I'd appreciate it greatly if you'd do a small favor for me."

"Well, sure," she chirped back. She was dripping from head to toe, with little rivulets of water breaking up and recombining on the glossy surface of her fair skin. She moved over to her uniform, which lay draped across the back of the only chair in this room.

"I had to retrieve Milo last night. Would you check on him, his wound, and his hangover? Oh, and if you can corral him down to Pike's place by noon, I'd be eternally indebted."

"We'll be there."

"Good. I'm heading over right now." Michael let himself out, and started down the hallway for the stairs.

\* \* \*

A soft continuous rapping of Jeanne's knuckles on the door startled Milo from his slumber. He semi-consciously groaned. Jeanne construed that as permission to enter, so she did, quietly shutting the door behind her. She brought a small plate of breakfast in her hand and she gently set on the bedside table.

The aroma of the fresh fruits and cheeses lured Milo to turn over and open his eyes. He quickly recoiled at the morning sunlight, yanking the covers back over his head.

"Good morning." Jeanne's voice was bubbling with enthusiasm, and the hungover Swift was in too much agony to tolerate cheerfulness. His piercing scowl was all the greeting Jeanne received.

"Where's Austin?" Milo pointed at the Commander's made bed. But in doing so, he winced noticeably.

"He went on ahead to Pike's repair shop. Let me have a look at that wrapping around your shoulder." Jeanne waited until Swift rolled over on his stomach, before

attending to him. “You’ve got quite an assortment of scars and the like,” was Jeanne’s observation from scanning Milo’s back.

“My body’s seen a lot of wear and tear, and maybe the warranty’s run out. But it’ll still get a lot more miles before it’s ready for the scrapyards.” He reached over to the plate and grabbed a piece of cheese. It looked a bit dried out and he warily sniffed it.

“Go ahead. It’s really quite good.” Jeanne had finished checking up on his wound. Milo scooped up the plate and ravenously inhaled the hearty portions of bread, cheese, and muesli. “I’m going back to my room; we’re supposed to meet Michael at noon. Think you’ll be alive by then?” Jeanne teased.

“Hmm. . .” Milo slid out of bed and sidled down the hall to the bathroom without responding. It would feel good to have hot water clear his pores and make his skin tingle. He climbed into the bath Jeanne had asked the innkeeper’s wife to draw for him minutes before, and breathed out heavily as the scalding water soothed his aches. Before long, the water was cold, and Milo reluctantly climbed out and dried himself off.

He eyeballed his appearance in the mirror. His metallic hair had lost its luster, and now it hung lifelessly, covering his nape and most of his ears. He ran a comb through it and wrapped a bandanna around the top of his head. Milo stared vacantly at the figure on the other side of the mirror. The facial hair which he’d tried so hard to cultivate was but a thin layer of stubble. With a full beard, Milo was sure he’d appear quite distinguished. But Heaven had not granted this wish, and there was little he could do about it.

“It’s going to be a long day.”

\* \* \*

Pike’s shop was the scene of much activity, as well-wishers shuffled in and out bidding Roger farewell. Milo and Jeanne spied Austin going toward the parked hovertransport, his arms full of spare parts and supplies.

Milo parked the Cyclone and headed over to Austin. Roger must have seen Milo while talking with a group of locals, because he waved a hearty greeting to the lumbering giant. Jeanne joined Roger and his little group.

Milo approached the hovertransport. It was immense, almost fifteen yards long with armored plating and what Milo guessed to be some heavy weaponry on top, hidden under a protective gray tarp. Milo gave the hull a solid slap. He was much taken with the vehicle.

“Pretty impressive, isn’t it?” Michael stashed the last of Pike’s gear into the rear of the transport. He emerged from it, and joined Milo. “Well, we’re almost ready to

leave. He's fixed our Cyclones."

"Except mine," Jeanne added.

"Right. Jeanne, you'll ride with Roger in the hovertransport. Another thing I just remembered. Missiles are extremely rare. Use them only when necessary; if you can, use energy weapons instead, do. Okay suit up and move out!"

The four would-be guerrillas donned their battle armor and powered up their mecha. Their convoy finally got rolling, pushing its way through the outer reaches of the city. These thinly populated slums were even worse than those situated within the crater that engulfed most of old Vienna. Jeanne examined the environment, pelted by the numerous stares of hatred and suspicion the rebel caravan received as it left the outer city behind.

*Sad. These people are too scared to fight. And without help-* Jeanne's thought was rudely interrupted by a row of explosions that Roger did his best to avoid. He swerved wildly to his left, jerking the transport around roughly. The convoy had already split up its ranks.

Out of the corner of her eye, Jeanne saw Michael, well on his way to completing the metamorphosis from a motorcycle to a staunchly armored battlesuit.

A squadron of *Gurab* Shock troopers rose from behind a crumbling building and hovered momentarily, while their leader telepathically relayed the strategy to each trooper. The general populace in the immediate area fled, running helter-skelter for cover.

Milo was foolishly charging the pack of death looming before them.

"Not here!" Michael's voice ordered on his radio. "All we'll do is wreck the city!"

"No great loss. Most of it's already gone to the dogs."

"Cut out the social commentary and just do it." Michael kicked in more power to his boosters and fled the scene of battle, silently hoping the Invid wouldn't follow.

The squadron of Invid closed, slowly increasing their altitude to get a better view of the human rebels. They fired ahead of them to try to anticipate their movement. Michael gunned the Cyclone armor's jets, to lift him up to fifteen meters. When one of the Shock troopers was right above the rubble-strewn street, the target scope emerged from the Cyclone armor's shoulder, and Michael fired two shots from his hand-held heavy pulse cannon into the Invid's torso. The violet Invid battlesuit listed, and then fell to the ground, crashing harmlessly into the broken road seconds after the hovertransport had passed. Michael smiled smugly, and then turned back toward the group.

"How do they keep finding us?" Jeanne demanded in frustration.

"Protoculture sensors," Roger replied, evading as best he could in the enormous

hovertransport. “Round about six years ago they first started installing them on mecha.”

“Well, that’s just dandy,” Michael said, overhearing the exchange on his radio. “I’d like to thank you and Milo for informing me in advance!”

Milo’s inventive mind had already devised a snappy come-back to Michael’s sarcasm, but he decided to hold his tongue. . . this time.

The caravan had just made it out of the city, the thirteen remaining Invid behind them in close pursuit. They fired only sporadically now as they broke up to surround the humans. The leader of the Invid group was a worker-caste Invid piloting a light-weight *Iigaa* Armored Scout mecha; with its relatively sensitive sensory equipment she could better control the battle. The subordinates were all of the less intelligent warrior-caste, in the twenty foot tall purple *Gurabs*, mounting as armament an eight-foot long heavy plasma cannon on either side of its one-eyed crab-like body. The arms and legs of this mecha were more massive as well, and it was as dangerous in close combat with the claws as it was at long range with the guns. Only the gross inaccuracy of the warrior-caste Invid pilots’ fire kept Michael and his companions from being killed outright.

Once outside of the city, Milo engaged his Cyclone’s transformation sequence and readied his Sal-9 and opened fire on his pursuers. Michael motioned the hovertransport to get out of the way of the engagement and joined Milo in firing at the Invid.

“There are too many of them,” Milo cried over the radio while evading the Invid cannons. “I’ve got to use my missiles.”

Michael had just downed a trooper and hesitated before replying, “Go ahead, but make it a good one!”

Michael saw Milo’s helmet nod, and Milo hovered into position in front of the largest single concentration of Invid mecha. Milo’s eyes drifted to the corner of his field of view, ordering the target scope to come out of its housing; it quickly settled in front of his helmet. Two armor plates on the chest of his Blowsperior Cyclone opened to reveal two sets of six Recluse mini-missiles. Milo concentrated and the twelve rocket-propelled grenades in the chest launcher leapt out of their housings and spiraled into the Invid formation. In two seconds, four of the Invid had collapsed onto the ground, and the survivors were regrouping for a counterattack.

“Good job, Swift. Now that some of the heat is off, let’s-” Michael began.

Roger’s voice interrupted over the radio, saying, “Commander, come and pull the tarp off the transport’s roof. We can give you fire support.”

Milo’s mind recalled the massive bulges atop the vehicle, and quickly suggested, “Commander, you keep them pinned down; I’ll do it.”

Michael grunted in agreement as he put a sizable dent in one of the Troopers' armor.

After Roger radioed his message, Jeanne ran to a compartment in the middle of the hovertransport and was powering up the heavy weapon systems. Milo got the canvas sheet off the vehicle's roof and revealed a turreted double-barreled plasma gun and a smaller M-235 rapid-fire laser cannon towards the transport's rear. Roger stopped the transport and made for a ladder, emerging on the roof through a hatch soon after Jeanne had fired her first few shots from the turret's control console.

With the added firepower, it was short work to drive the remaining Invid off, their lead Armored Scout retreating with the five Shock Troopers that remained. Michael converted his battle armor back into a cycle and surveyed the battlesite. Husks of downed Invid shock troopers littered the razed and cratered field, some oozing their pilots' thick green blood.

"Not bad, kids," the Commander stated. "But we're running low on power and ammo. We'll have to salvage downed ships on the way."

Milo cleared his throat and said, "So where to next?"

Michael wiped the sweat from his forehead and looked toward the shadowy peaks in the distance. "West-south-west. There's something I want to check out in the mountains. Can you take us to Innsbruck, Roger?"

Roger nodded.

"Good," Michael added.

"And after that, oh fearless leader?" Milo jeered in a tone that straddled the border between playfulness and insubordination.

"Beats me. I don't live on this planet," Michael replied curtly.

"You do now," Milo smugly retorted.