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LION'S ROAR

Part One

Steven Mohan, Jr.

**Grayland Gardens Arena
Grayland Gardens, Solaris VII
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
14 March 3064**

The match had all the grace and subtlety of a mugging.

David Singh jerked his *Grasshopper* into a crouch just as the *Mauler*'s dual saw passed over his head. The ninety-ton assault 'Mech had thrown a round-house punch that failed to connect with its target, giving David a precious moment to side-step right, straighten, and hit his jump jets.

He'd let the big machine get too close.

David short-hopped his heavy away from the *Mauler*, feathering his jump jets and turning so that he landed facing his opponent.

The *Mauler*'s pilot, Ichabod Timkin, had swung the saw through the space where the *Grasshopper*'s head had been and ended up connecting with the trunk of a massive pine tree. Timkin had managed to get the dual saw that replaced his 'Mech's right hand actuator lodged in the tree's broad trunk. For a second, David considered moving around to the *Mauler*'s rear while it was pinned in place.

Then he saw that what that dual saw could do.

His external mikes picked up the high-pitched screech of dual ferro-carbide circular blades ripping through the tree's flesh. Just a burst of sound, a spray of sawdust, and then the *crack* of the tree coming apart.

So much for pinning him in place.

David fired his medium laser, lighting the falling pine tree like a candle and hopefully flooding Timkin's IR display with a wash of thermal energy.

And then he *ran*.

Timkin, because he was a fool, lumbered after him.

Earlier David had speared the giant's left knee with a line of emerald fire. The shot hadn't been enough to bring the *Mauler* down, but it was enough to drop ten or fifteen kph off the monster's top speed. So David's *'Hopper*, which already possessed an edge in maneuverability because of its jump jets, now was *faster*, too.

David planned to race ahead of the *Mauler*, set up at long range, and allow the Combine pilot to blunder into his guns.

He moved quickly through the forest, but carefully, too. The ground was littered with tree stumps where the Freak Show crews had cleared narrow 'Mech paths through the woods. But there were also overturned golf carts, broken furniture, even the remnants of a stone fireplace.

Grayland Gardens had once been a beautiful resort an hour west of Solaris City, until a *Lucifer* pilot engaged in an aerospace duel took an autocannon round through his cockpit and had the temerity to die mid-flight. The unfortunate aviator rode the fighter straight down into Grayland Gardens' main foyer, literally wiping it off the luxury resort map.

And littering the area with debris. So it was important for David to watch his step. He couldn't afford a fall.

Not with that monster right behind him.

He stepped into a clearing—a stretch of the former resort's golf course. The greens were overgrown with knee-high stalks of grass, but otherwise the course was ideal; straight, gently-sloping ground with a perfect line-of-sight down the fairway, bordered on both sides by the dark silhouettes of Scotch pines.

David back-stepped away from the point where he'd pushed through the trees. Any minute now Timkin would burst into his gun sights and that would be *that*.

Timkin's squat, heavy-set 'Mech had undoubtedly began life as a MAL-1R, but it had been heavily modified since. The two ER large lasers extending from the *Mauler*'s shoulders had been traded for actual arms which had, in turn, been fitted with a dual saw in its right hand and a pile driver in the left. But that wasn't all Timkin had given up to carry around 17 tons of brawling gear. In order to bring his weapons load-out down to something the *Mauler* could actually haul around, he would've also had to abandon a mix of LRMs and autocannon rounds.

Which meant Timkin had taken a deadly long-range hitter and turned it into a brawler that couldn't beat you as long as you kept out of its deadly embrace.

If David kept the *Mauler* at a distance, there was no way he could lose.

What he couldn't understand is why Timkin couldn't see that.

The whole set-up made David uneasy. He might be able to convince himself that Timkin was just stupid, but not Michael Pitgar, the owner of Freak Show Entertainment, the sponsor of this little match. David couldn't imagine the viewers were going to turn in to watch a nimble *Grasshopper* dance all around a mutilated *Mauler*. And Pitgar was not one to make a mistake.

Not when he could smell a kroner, anyway.

David's thermal sensors showed that he'd opened up a good half-klick lead on the *Mauler*. He stopped and pivoted, firing a flight of LRM's at empty space, like a quarterback lofting a pass to receiver running a timing route. His cockpit shuddered as the missiles exploded from the *Grasshopper*'s head.

The missiles hit just as Timkin's *Mauler* stalked from cover, shattering armor and rocking it backwards. The monster was painted black with white and red trim of DeLon Stables. David flashed on the DeLon emblem: a rose vine curled around a dagger on a black field, then the fire burned the paint right off the massive machine.

The *Mauler* staggered forward and let loose with a flight of its own LRM's launched from the left torso, but David was already on the move, leaping left and slagging the *Mauler*'s damaged chest armor with his lasers.

Timkin pushed his machine in a heavy lope, desperately trying to close the gap so he could pummel David.

Wasn't going to happen.

David back-stepped another hundred meters, keeping the giant machine in front of him where he could punish it with his missiles and his lasers.

He was so happy with that thought that he didn't see the second 'Mech come up behind him until it was too late.

A massive blow smashed into the 'Hopper's right shoulder, and it took all of David's skill to keep his feet. His wifeframe schematic blinked from green to yellow.

He glanced down at his rear monitor.

And saw the sinister, alien lines of an *Axman*, painted the black and red of the Dispossessed. Only this *Axman* didn't carry an axe.

It carried a flail.

The flail was a spiked tungsten-alloy weight tied to the *Axman's* hand actuator by a reinforced myomer tether.

Pitgar, you bastard. This was supposed to be a one-on-one match. He pivoted his '*Hopper* to face the new threat, squeezing off a laser shot that hit the *Axman's* torso-mounted autocannon.

The other 'Mech pilot held the flail in front of the *Axman's* body and began to rotate its wrist. It spun the weapon around in a deadly circle, moving the ball faster and faster, until it was nothing but a gray blur of death.

David's eyes flickered down.

The *Mauler* was stalking up behind him. The great machine stopped and set itself.

David shifted his weight and tapped his jump jets, executing a small hop to the right. Just as the *Mauler* poured autocannon fire into the spot where David had been standing an instant before.

And hit the *Axman* instead.

The smaller 'Mech stumbled backwards under the hammer blow of the *Mauler's* AC/2.

David took a step back, lined up his lasers, and fired.

A line of emerald fire sliced through the myomer tether, cutting loose the flail on the upswing.

The spiked ball smashed into the *Axman's* cockpit.

And the 'Mech dropped like a stone.

David had a clear shot at the *Axman's* cockpit. The flail had smashed the 'Mech's canopy, and the pilot inside was clearly dazed from the fall. One quick laser shot would reduce the *Axman's* pilot to a stain of charred proteins. David wasn't a killer, but he couldn't fight two 'Mechs at the same time.

He couldn't let the *Axman* get back up.

David stepped forward and stepped *down* on the *Axman's* prone knee, smashing armor. Then he leaned down and executed a little quick surgery with his laser.

Amputating the leg.

The *Axman* wasn't getting back up. But hopefully the pilot would.

David realized how much that instant of mercy had cost him when the *Mauler*'s AC/2 bit into the *Grasshopper*'s vulnerable rear armor.

Moving on pure instinct, David juked right, then left, and ducked into the woods. The autocannon fire followed him into the trees, tearing off branches, scouring bark from the trees, and smashing saplings, but mostly missing his damaged back armor.

Giving him a few seconds to catch his breath as he moved through the woods.

David glanced at his wireframe schematic. His rear armor was a sunny yellow. The *Mauler* had really done a number on his back. He wouldn't be able to take another pounding like that.

Then he glanced down at his thermal sensors and got another piece of bad news. He saw the *Mauler* on his screen, about two hundred meters to the north, but there were two more contacts moving in from the south.

Pitgar hadn't sent two 'Mechs against him.

He'd sent a lance.

David cursed steadily for a full minute. How the hell was he going to get out of this one?

He cut right, planning to circle around the two new contacts and hit them in the rear. He didn't really expect for it to work (surely they could see him on their sensors), but he might get a look at what he was up against without having to commit to a two-on-one engagement.

He moved out of the woods and saw his opponents approaching from a distance of about four hundred meters: a Silver Dragons *Hatamoto-Chi* armed with a vibroblade and a blue Banshees *Dervish* fitted with a pair of fluid guns.

David dropped his reticle over the green and silver Combine 'Mech and loosed a flight of LRMs, stepping back into the woods as he did so.

Damn, damn, damn.

They had him three to one.

What now?

Well, all of these 'Mechs sported special weapons and all were slow. (Well, not the *Dervish*.) Seemed like the theme of the day was brute force versus speed and agility. And one more thing: none of these pilots seemed particularly skilled.

David had a chance.

But he had to figure out what the hell was going on. Ordinarily that meant understanding the goals and tendencies of his opponent. That was the case here, too, of course, but the insight that would save his life was realizing that his enemy wasn't the three 'MechWarriors arrayed against him.

It was Michael Pitgar.

After that, it was easy.

David turned and moved back the way he'd come.

All Pitgar cared about was money, which meant ratings, which meant an exciting fight. The four 'Mechs the promoter had set against David were far more dangerous in their original configurations than set-up for a brawl. So how'd he get them to agree to the match?

Answer: he'd offered a huge bonus to the MechWarrior who brought David's *Grasshopper* down. Which meant the three remaining machines were competitors as well as allies. David didn't have to worry about coordinated tactics.

He could pick them off one-by-one.

Starting with the most dangerous.

David popped out of the woods again, ending up back on the golf course. Even Ichabod Timkin was too smart to be lured into the same trap again.

Unless David used an entirely different kind of bait.

He sprayed the woods with his laser, igniting the underbrush. A line of orange flame raced across the ground, catching dry branches and patches of grass. David glanced down at his IR display and

saw the glowing white silhouette of the *Mauler* only three hundred meters from the forest's edge.

And then the 'Mech was swallowed by a white hot wave of fire.

David began counting in his mind.

The *Mauler* burst out of cover before he hit ten.

David pulled into his triggers, splashing emerald fire across the *Mauler*'s already damaged chest armor and no doubt adding to the assault machine's tremendous heat load.

Then he turned and jumped.

It was that exact moment when Timkin decided to do something smart.

David had figured that the big machine would be too hot to risk launching LRM's and Timkin too rattled to open up with his autocannon.

He was half right.

Timkin's AC/2 bit into David's back as he came down, flensing armor from the *Grasshopper*'s back. David's gaze flickered to his wireframe. Yellows bleeding to red.

He came down in a crouch, the impact rocking him in the cockpit, the sheer force of the autocannon shoving him forward in the moment of minimum balance.

He stumbled.

Jerked back, willing his '*Hopper* not to fall.

Somehow kept his feet.

As the rear right torso blinked red to black.

The roar of the AC/2 battering his 'Mech like an angry hail.

And then all at once, the autocannon cut out.

David glanced down. Timkin was still stalking his machine toward him, but the cannon had stopped. Either the long gout of sustained fire had jammed the weapon or Timkin had cut too deeply into his ammo allocation when he'd modified his 'Mech.

David wasn't going to wait to find out which it was. He pivoted, moving the mangled rear armor out of reach. (Just in case

the autocannon came back.) Then he dropped his reticle over the monster's left knee. The joint that was already damaged from an earlier shot.

Time to operate.

David poured laser fire into the weak joint, slicing through armor to get at the vulnerable ferro-titanium bones beneath.

Backpedaling to hold range.

One eye on the rear monitor, the other on that *Mauler*, ready to pivot right and hit his jets the second that autocannon came back.

Sweat bathed his head and burned his eyes as the lasers dumped their waste heat into his cockpit. The shrill call of the heat alarm weaving itself into the rhythm of his desperation.

And Timkin just kept coming.

Step forward and step forward and step forward—

And then the monster's left leg buckled. The *Mauler* toppled forward, smashing into the field of grass that once had been a golf course.

David was pushing his '*Hopper* forward before the horrible sound died away. He selected the pilot frequency. "Surrender, Timkin."

"Not yet, Singh." The *Mauler* extended the pile driver arm, trying to use it to lever itself up. Not easy to do without hands. But Timkin did manage to push the monster a meter off the ground.

Then two.

The *Grasshopper* closed the distance rapidly.

Timkin got the second arm beneath him.

And David kicked it, *hard*, right at the elbow joint.

The *Mauler* smashed into the ground again.

"*You're done, Timkin,*" David snarled.

Unsteady laughter floated out of his radio. "A-are you sure, Singh? Look at your sensors lately? My buddies are almost here."

David glanced down. Sure enough, two contacts moving in fast from the south. They'd had to detour around the fire, but his time was running out.

David reached down and smashed the *Mauler*'s canopy with the claw built into his left hand. "You're *DONE*."

"You're no killer, Singh. That was a nice show, but you won't murder me."

"No?" said David, "But I will savage your 'Mech. I'll pull it apart, piece by piece."

"But the other two 'Mechs will get you," Timkin squeaked.

"You're not going to win," David snapped. "Your only choice is how much damage you take in losing."

A heartbeat of silence.

And then—

Timkin's broken voice going out over the referee's channel. "Freak Show, Timkin. I surrender."

And David's *Grasshopper* was up and running.

Two down and two to go.

And then he was going to have one hell of a talk with Michael Pitgar.

He glanced back and saw a pair of shapes racing across the greens toward him. Six, seven hundred meters. If he ran, they'd shoot him in the back and it wouldn't take more than one or two lucky shots to take him out, all the way out.

And if he stood his ground, they'd wear him down.

Time to switch to Plan C.

If he could figure out a Plan C.

And then he had it.

But it was dangerous as hell. In fact, it would most likely get him killed. Man, he hated Plan C.

But it was the only thing that stood between him defeat. And he was *not* going to lose.

David turned, raced toward the two oncoming 'Mechs. And they reacted just like he knew they would, like competitors after the same prize.

The *Hatamoto-Chi* set itself, legs splayed far apart, samurai helmet facing David, the vibroblade that replaced the left-arm PPC braced by the right hand and held out in front of the body, perfectly still.

Waiting for the killing stroke.

It would make a perfect clip for the holovids.

Well, they weren't there yet.

Unwilling to yield the prize to the giant samurai, the *Dervish* darted around the *Hatamoto-Chi* and raced toward David. With five jump jets and a top speed of 86 kph, the modified DV-7D was the only 'Mech on the battlefield that could match David's maneuverability. And it was going to hit him before the idiot with the impressive blade got the chance.

The boxy SRM launchers that normally made up the medium 'Mech's hands had been replaced by fluid guns, and the pilot was already well inside his LRM range.

But he had a pair of medium lasers.

A line of emerald fire blasted past David's cockpit, missing only by a few meters, but missing.

Another burst of chromatic light melted armor from David's hip.

Damage, but not fatal.

Still nothing from the *Hatamoto*. The Combine pilot was waiting for David to come to him.

As he knew he must.

He was almost on top of the blue *Dervish*.

The Steiner pilot jerked his machine to a sudden stop. Set himself for a shot that would really count.

Right at that moment, David hit his jump jets and skyed it.

It was a perfect leap. Perfect because it had surprised both enemy pilots. Perfect because he'd gotten enough height that he could afford to feather his jets to avoid the *Dervish*'s wild shots. Perfect because it would carry him right over the *Hatamoto* and give him maybe a one in four chance of running himself out of this trap.

At least that must've been what the *Dervish* pilot figured, because suddenly he turned and raced past the *Hatamoto* going the *other* way, angling to hit David when he came down.

Which was also perfect.

Because as soon as the *Dervish* committed itself, David cut his jump jets, radically changing the parabolic arc his 'Mech inscribed in the sky. He counted three and tapped them again.

Lining everything up just *right*.

The *Hatamoto* pilot *finally* understood what was happening and turned away.

Too late.

David crossed his arms over his chest and pulled his legs up, essentially making himself into a seventy-ton cannonball.

That smashed right into the samurai's back.

The *Hatamoto-Chi* was an eighty-ton monster whose chassis was fashioned from endo steel. It was one tough customer, but it hadn't been designed to survive death from above.

The *Hatamoto*'s right arm ripped off and it went over, its vibro-blade burying itself in the earth up to its ornate Japanese hilt. The Combine 'Mech absorbed almost all of the impact of the collision.

But even the little that was left over was plenty for David.

The crash rattled the teeth in his head, jerked bones against muscle, compressed his spine. Hurt so much that David didn't even feel it when the *Grasshopper* hit the ground.

Damn Plan C.

He laid there for a long moment, the world rocking, shifting, and *sliding* around him. All he wanted, *all* he wanted was to squeeze his eyes shut and hold on until it stopped. Until it stopped and he could get off.

All he wanted.

But that was a lie.

The truth was he wanted one more thing.

To win the match.

So he shook his head and opened his eyes. Reached out for his control yoke. Got a single metal arm up underneath the *Grasshopper*'s body. Pushed up. Slowly.

Slowly.

Second arm.

Up a little more.

(Just like the *Mauler*.)

He exhaled. Let out a deep, shuddery breath. Fighting the sharp pain stabbing through his skull.

(Where—)

Something, something bothering him, what could it—

(Where—)

Slid his right leg up, balancing the '*Hopper*'s weight on that knee.

(Where was the—)

He raised the 'Mech's head and saw—

The *Dervish*.

Everything happened at once.

David gasped as it all came back to him. For a second his world was the blocky medium 'Mech, painted the blue and black of Banshees Stables.

And then the *Dervish* raised its left arm and fired the fluid gun. Paint splattered David's canopy.

Steiner blue, of course.

Without thinking, David surged forward. Throwing his 'Mech at the *Dervish*, hitting his jets. He was only a few meters off the ground.

But that's all he needed.

The *Grasshopper* plowed into the *Dervish*.

David's 'Mech was badly crippled by the death from above attack, but he outmassed the *Dervish* by a good fifteen tons and no opponent in the games was more ruthless than the laws of physics.

The *Dervish* went over, but not very hard. It was a glancing blow. Its pilot rolled the medium over on its left side.

David pushed himself up.

The *Dervish* raised its right hand.

David gained a knee.

It was some kind of weird, slow motion race.

One he was *not* going to lose.

He hobbled to his feet, just as the *Dervish* fired.

And suddenly the world was on fire.

A line of molten orange fire splashed his chest and he almost went down again. Worse, the inferno didn't go out when the *Dervish* cut fire.

Napalm.

Jellied gasoline that was sticky and very, very flammable. It was almost impossible to scrape off and it burned very hot.

Napalm had chased more than one pilot out of his 'Mech.

Heat spiked in David's cockpit and multiple alarms wailed, drawing out the sound of his swearing. He could *feel* the curses in the shape of his mouth, but all he heard was *disaster*.

And then the *Dervish* fired again.

Somehow, impossibly, his cockpit got *hotter*.

And then a light blinked red on his console. Aux bus breaker tripping. His 'Mech trying to shed load before the elevated heat load took out his reactor's mag bottle.

His forward monitor flickered and went out.

Truly blind.

Seconds left.

David staggered away from the *Dervish*. Caught a glimpse of a water hazard in his rear monitor.

He wheeled around.

Hit his jump jets.

Glanced down. A stream of golden napalm washed his feet and then passed below and behind him.

His *Grasshopper* sailed into the sky.

And for that instant David didn't worry about anything: not the damage he'd taken, not how he was going to beat the *Dervish*, not even how he was going to land.

For that single moment, he was just a man who was doing what he was meant to do.

And who could ask for more than that?

He crouched his legs and braced himself.

Gave himself to gravity.

His *Grasshopper* came down near the water hazard's center, the water cushioning the impact. He stumbled and took an unsteady step forward.

But he kept his feet.

And right then he knew he had won.

David cupped his 'Mech's hands, reached down, came away with water. He poured it over his canopy. The water was brackish and coated with a bright green scum, but it still cleaned off most of the paint. His canopy was still tinted blue.

But he could see.

And the water was draining away the heat.

David turned to face the *Dervish*, already racing toward him.

His targeting computer had dropped out with the rest of his aux bus, but his lasers were tied into the main bus.

He eyeballed the *Dervish*'s right arm and pulled into his main trigger.

His laser burned into the fluid gun, melting armor until it ran off in a little stream of molten metal that set the grass below afire.

The heat alarm shrieked again, but David held the shot, praying the water hazard would allow him to dissipate enough heat to make it through.

The *Dervish* kept coming.

And suddenly its right arm was consumed in a yellow-white fireball as the napalm all went up at once.

The *Dervish* jerked to a stop, its right arm just *gone*, its body racked by a series of secondary explosions.

The Steiner 'Mech slowly toppled, and David Singh knew he had survived another one of Michael Pitgar's betrayals.

**Hanse Davion Medical Center
Black Hills, Solaris City, Solaris VII
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
15 March 3064**

All things considered, it was probably a good thing that David spent the night in the hospital. If he had been well enough to walk away from the match, he likely would have killed Michael Pitgar. Even after a night in the hospital with a saline IV sticking out of his arm, his system pumped full of pain medication, and his head still ringing from his concussion, it was still a very close thing.

In fact, David almost certainly *would* have killed Pitgar if he hadn't been proceeded into the room by a beautiful woman.

She wasn't *supermodel* beautiful, but she was definitely the kind of woman who'd get a second look. One meter sixty-six with dark brown, almost black hair. Her skin was a creamy white. She wore a black skirt and a dark green silk blouse, accented with a simple gold necklace.

But what really caught David's attention were her eyes: clear blue and smart.

This woman was nobody's fool.

Those eyes met his in a frank stare, and her lip quirked in an expression of respect. As if he'd passed some kind of test.

Michael Pitgar couldn't have been more different from this self-possessed woman.

He was tall, one meter eighty-five, but broad enough across the chest (and the gut) not to look it. He wore an ugly brown suit that was at least two seasons out of date. His comb-over was another shade of brown that only matched his suit in the sense that it was entirely unattractive.

But there was something in his gray eyes. Something sharp and calculating.

Something dangerous.

That was OK.

David could be dangerous, too.

Pitgar smiled. "I hope you are well, David. You took quite a tumble there near the end of the match. We wouldn't want Freak Show's greatest star to get hurt."

David smiled back, a cold, feral smile. "So you're concerned about me. That's good. I'd hate to think what you'd do if you were out to get me."

Pitgar actually managed to look wounded. "*David.*"

The woman folded delicate arms across her quite lovely chest and looked from David to Pitgar.

"You set four 'Mechs against me and *didn't even tell me.*"

Pitgar shrugged with his hands raised palm up. "I had a plan, David."

"What could you possibly have hoped to accomplish," said David coldly, "besides my death?"

"How about a 4.2 rating and a six share," said the woman in a clear voice, "and double that among the eighteen to twenty-five male demographic."

David blinked. "What?"

"You'll have to forgive him, Marcy," said Pitgar, his voice tinged with sarcasm. "The Capellans once tried to assassinate David, and so now he sees the hand of Liao behind every cloudy day."

"*Shut. Up.*" David snarled.

Pitgar rolled his eyes and turned away.

The woman drew a deep breath and stepped forward. "Mr. Singh, my name is Marcy Kessel." She extended her hand. "Will you listen to what I have to say?"

David studied the proffered hand for a long moment.

And finally took it.

"What Mr. Pitgar is trying to explain is that you are Freak Show's principal asset."

"Then why is he trying to kill me?" David snapped.

"*Why would I want to kill you?*" Pitgar shouted.

"If the Capellans were paying you—" David shouted back.

"Please," Marcy roared, cutting them both off. She looked from Pitgar to David and drew a deep breath. "Now. Mr. Singh. After the public debacle of the first Capellan assassination attempt, not only is the Maskirovka not trying to kill you, but they can't afford to let you die—even in an accident. If anything bad happens to you, they pay the price."

"Well—" said David darkly.

"Now," said Marcy, without pausing to listen to what he had to say, "in regards to yesterday's contest. It wasn't Mr. Pitgar's idea to match you against a lance. It was mine."

Pitgar flashed him an *I-told-you-so* look.

"What?" David whispered.

"Thanks to your terrific moves against the *Atlas* and the publicity surrounding the assassination attempt, you have the highest Name ID of any MechWarrior on the planet who is not a Grand Tournament regular. It is my plan to build on your reputation, use it to make you into something special. And *that's* why I wanted you to face the lance of brawlers. Because Mr. Pitgar was sure you could beat them, and because it was the kind of thing that would stick in the public's imagination."

David frowned, feeling the unpleasant sensation of his righteous anger dissipating. "What if I had lost?"

She shrugged. "And what if you had? You lost to the *Atlas*, yet the clip of you dodging those missiles in mid-flight is still the eighth most popular download from Julian Nero's broadcasts. The point isn't that you win or lose, but that you put on a great show. And because you hunger to win, you always put on a great show."

"You want to fight in the Grand Tournament?" said Pitgar, offering David a sharp, clever smile. "Stick with me."

Marcy smiled, too, but her smile wasn't calculating like Pitgar's. It was bright and lovely and honest. "Don't worry, David," she said, "we're going to make you a star."

**Hanse Davion Medical Center
Black Hills, Solaris City, Solaris VII
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
17 March 3064**

Marcy Kessel pushed David's wheelchair towards the double glass doors. She smelled nice, a light trace of lavender and rose petals warmed by her body heat. David took a deep breath, drawing it in.

He felt warm and good. For the first time in a long time, he saw the path forward, the route that would take him to the Grand Tournament. Somehow, he had managed to do away with the harsh edge of desperation that had shadowed his life ever since he'd come to Solaris, really ever since the Capellans had invaded Sarna.

It was amazing how good life felt without it.

The doors slid open, and Marcy brought his wheelchair to a stop on the sidewalk. She was dressed in a sheer pink blouse, pearls, and navy slacks. She bent down and flashed him a smile. "I'll bring the car around."

David nodded and smiled back. "Sure." Watched her walk away.

The hospital policy requiring departing patients to leave via wheelchair was stupid. (Of course, it had given him an excuse to enjoy Marcy's proximity.) Now that he was officially outside the hospital, he figured he could stand up. He stood and stretched.

David glanced around. It was a beautiful spring day, sunny and mild, which suited his mood perfectly. He had come through years of darkness to arrive at this place, and he thought he might just like to stay. There was a small park across the street from the hospital, and he could hear the angry chatter of a pair of squirrels, smell the perfume of freshly cut grass.

He glanced right. A quartet of doctors in white lab coats approached, three of them arguing heatedly over some abstruse treatment option, the fourth trailing along, obviously irritated with the conversation.

David turned away, not wanting to have to face any questions about why he wasn't in the wheelchair. He looked out on the park and sighed.

The doctors brushed past him, heading into the hospital.

And then a deep voice said, "Hello, Ramesh. I *have* missed you."

David startled at the sound of his old name and wheeled around. No one had called him that since—

"Xu." (He pronounced the name "Shoe.")

Xu Longshen stood before him, wearing a white lab coat. (He was the fourth "doctor," David realized, not really with the other three, but using the coat as protective camouflage so he could approach unobserved.)

Xu wore a dark blue suit beneath the coat. He stood straight and tall, his black hair carefully combed back, his face guarded by black-rimmed glasses, looking quite different than the humble purveyor of traditional Chinese foods that he had posed as the last time David had seen him.

A chill wriggled down David's spine.

This was the man who'd tried to use Beatriz da Rosa as the instrument of his death.

And it had almost worked.

"You don't dare kill me," said David, desperately hoping it was true. "If I die, everyone will suspect the Maskirovka."

"*Ramesh*," said Xu, and somehow he managed to put a tone of injury in his voice, "the very *idea*. It saddens me that you think so little of me."

"Then what do you want?" said David coldly.

"Now, now, is that any way to treat an old friend?"

David said nothing.

Xu sighed. "I see you are going to make this difficult. And all I really want to do is help you."

This comment earned a snort from David.

"I'm here to warn you not to trust Michael Pitgar."

David laughed heartily. "I will *never* trust Michael Pitgar. But as long as our interests match, I can work with him. I win, he wins."

Xu shook his head. "You're wrong, Ramesh."

"Stop calling me that," David snapped. "Ramesh da Silva died on Sarna. I am David Singh."

Xu bowed his head. "Very well, *David*. The Maskirovka can learn and adapt. Despite our past differences, today all we really want is the best for you."

"Oh, yes," said David sarcastically.

"Pitgar is dangerous. And you should not trust this woman, Marcy Kessel, they will lead you down a dangerous path."

David narrowed his eyes, stared at Xu carefully. "No," he said slowly. "I am a former soldier of the Sarna Supremacy who left his home rather than live under Capellan rule. Every time I fight, every time someone discusses the da Rosa incident or my background, it makes the Confederation look bad. You can't kill me, but you still want to stop me from fighting. So now you're trying to scare me."

Xu shook his head, made a little clicking sound with his tongue. "So cynical for one so young."

"Right, I wonder where I learned that."

Xu's voice turned cold. "You will find, my young friend, we Maskirovka have many more weapons than assassination to enforce our will."

At that moment a gorgeous, red Windstorm hovercar pulled up to the curb and gently settled to the ground.

Xu smiled warmly. "Well, I see our time here is at an end. Everything I have said to you today is the truth."

"Sure," said David. More sarcasm.

"Oh, I know you don't believe me now," said Xu, "but perhaps there will come a time when you may choose to reevaluate your opinion." And with that, he stepped through the double doors into the hospital.

Marcy stepped out of the hovercar's driver side. "Ready to go, David?"

"Wait," David said, darting through the double doors.

But Xu was gone. There was no sign of him. He'd vanished like the phantom that he was.

Troubled, David stepped back outside.

A frown marred Marcy's pretty face. "Who was that?"

David hesitated and then he shook his head. "Never mind. It was no one."

She flashed him a dazzling smile. "Well, then get in. I want to talk about the coverage of your next fight."

David smiled and nodded. But once inside, he realized it would take more than a lovely woman to banish the darkness that had once ruled his life.

The Dam

Blauflüsse Valley, Equatus, Solaris VII

Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance

2 April 3064

The Dam was a dirty, ugly venue, worse even than Grayland Gardens. A fifteen-meter concrete wall had been laid across the path of the Blauflüsse. On one side of the wall, the river had overflowed its bank, swallowing the brushland of the river valley for ten kilometers in all directions and making a picturesque blue lake.

Not on the arena side.

The arena was a mix of scraggly brush growing out of rocky earth and baked mud that had once been river bottom. The dam itself was ugly, too. It was discolored with black scorch marks where lasers had marked its surface and pits where autocannon rounds had gouged out chunks of ferrocrete.

Seven or eight years before, the dam had been scheduled for demolition and an enterprising promoter had staged a 'Mech battle in its shadow. The promoter got a free venue, and the local authorities thought they would get a free head start on the demolition. Unfortunately, the dam proved to be a tougher nut to crack than anyone expected.

Constructed of ferrocrete blocks five meters thick, it was easily able to withstand the stray shot (the contestants weren't shooting at the dam after all, but at each other.) And so another fight was scheduled for the venue and another one after that, and still the dam did not fall.

It turned out that fans liked the venue—the monster looming in the background, the promise of destruction never quite fulfilled, but today, maybe today, yes?

Eventually the idea of blowing the dam was abandoned. It was too valuable as an arena to destroy.

So David wasn't worried about the ferrocrete wall. It looked plenty thick.

No, the thing to worry about was Laura Kidane's *King Crab*. Her hundred-ton assault 'Mech was lurking somewhere around these low, rocky hills. The *King Crab* was dangerous, armed with a pair

of Autocannon/20s, a large laser, and LRM5. And Kidane was a good pilot, one of the rising stars of Blackstar Stables.

But the *King Crab* was ponderous and slow. He had no doubt he could beat Laura.

If he could just find her.

The dam's electrical generators were throwing off his MAD gear, and IR wasn't much better. The brushland was a sun-baked hell, easily exceeding 34°C. The entire landscape showed up on his thermal scan as a fuzzy green patch, except for the black circle that was the lake beyond the dam.

That left David the option of a manual search.

The part that made *that* tricky was the terrain: broad, shallow hills on either side of the riverbed. Deep enough to hide a crouching 'Mech, especially one with a low profile like a *King Crab*. If he kept to hilltops, he'd be silhouetted against the sky, and if he jumped into the wrong valley and ended up facing Laura at point-blank range, she'd pulverize him.

So he was doing the only thing left open to him. As he came to each hill, he dropped his *Grasshopper* on its hands and knees and crawled along the shallow side until he could peer above the ridge line. It was a grueling exercise that required intense concentration and unmatched balance, but it minimized his target profile. And since his LRM5 were stored in the *'Hopper*'s head, he might even get in a free shot.

Which didn't stop him wondering what the trick was.

He'd asked Marcy, but she had refused to tell him.

They had been in bed together: her head on his chest, snuggled into the crook of his arm, her body warm on his.

"So what do you have planned for me this time?"

"Can't tell you," she said drowsily.

"Oh, come on," he said playfully. "We shouldn't keep secrets from each other."

She giggled, her bodily shaking deliciously against his. "Sorry, that's the rule."

"Why is that again?"

"Because," she said, "we want your reaction to be spontaneous—so people don't think the game is rigged."

"I'm sure some of them think that anyway."

She propped herself up on an elbow, looked down at him. "No, not really. To the public, your loss to the *Atlas*, the Capellan plot to kill you, even your injuries in the battle with the brawlers—all of it proves you're genuine."

"Well, if you're so sure everyone thinks I'm honest, why not tell me what the trick is?"

She rolled her eyes. "You are impossible to argue with."

He cracked a wide smile. "Then don't argue with me." He pulled her down into a long, lingering kiss.

David smiled at the memory of what happened next.

But she'd never told him what the trick was. In a way he was glad. He didn't really want any special advantages. Besides, it said something about Marcy's integrity that she wouldn't tell him.

She was honest—and that was a very attractive quality, indeed.

Of course, it did make hunting for Kidane more difficult.

He reached the top of the ridge and peered down.

Into a low, narrow valley, only just wide enough for a 'Mech to pass through. The land was covered with a fine detritus of sand-stone rubble, worn free from the valley walls by blazing sun and rushing floods and the cycles of heat and cold that came with the turning of the world. The valley was populated by hardy, whip-like plants, tough enough to survive this hell.

But no *King Crab*.

Where the hell was she?

He glanced at his thermal display, eyes taking in that featureless patch of perfect black.

And suddenly he knew what the trick was.

David carefully pushed his *'Hopper* to its feet.

A 'Mech walking down the bottom of the lake would be able to approach unobserved. The lake's bottom curved into the shore

at a relatively steep angle. Was there a place where a *King Crab* could make it out?

He didn't know, dammit. He hadn't studied the topography of the lake bottom. He'd expected the fight to take place on *this* side of the wall.

He looked up. Kidane had yet to appear at either end of the dam. Since he'd deduced her plan, she'd lost the advantage of surprise, but she would still command the high ground. It was always easier to shoot down rather than up.

No way he'd beat her if she was dropping ordnance on his head.

But maybe he could surprise her before she got into position.

A slow smile played across his face. He'd give her one hell of a surprise. He turned and stalked down the hill moving towards the dried riverbed. He stepped his *Grasshopper* onto the dried mud, felt his 'Mech sink half a meter into the soft ground. He took an experimental step forward. There was an instant of resistance and then his foot pulled free and he lurched forward.

Not graceful, but he could move and the river's former course would take him straight to the dam. As the river basin grew wider, he'd draw closer to the valley walls until he reached a point where he could jump.

Straight up.

Onto the mesa overlooking the riverbed.

When Kidane's *King Crab* staggered out of the lake, he'd be there waiting for her.

It was a beautiful plan.

That was entirely ruined when he followed a bend in the river around a corner.

And saw the black *King Crab* crouched up against the dam wall, half hidden in shadow. She let loose a flight of LRM's.

David ducked left and two of the missiles impacted his arm. The rest flashed harmlessly by. Then he pivoted and fired, launching a flight of his own missiles and then following up with a blast from his laser.

If David had been a fraction slower, if he'd stopped to wonder what Kidane was doing there at the base of the dam rather than up above where he'd expected her, the fight might have gone very differently. But David Singh was an artist in a 'Mech, sure handed and lightning fast.

This time it worked against him.

His missiles hit in a line that stretched across the *King Crab's* torso and impacted the ferrocrete wall on either side. Plasma orange fires suddenly bloomed in the desert.

By the time his emerald laser bit into her carapace, a second set of explosions went off a few meters to the right.

David blinked. *What the hell?* What was that? It was too far from his first strike to be collateral damage. So what—

The answer came to him as he was juking left, avoiding the deadly line of autocannon fire Kidane was walking towards him.

He looked right.

And saw a long, ugly crack propagating through the ferrocrete wall. Angry white water surged through the opening, ripping away chunks of ferrocrete.

Son of a bitch.

That was the trick. Pitgar had blown the wall. He'd arranged it so it looked like the dam's destruction was a natural byproduct of the 'Mech battle.

That's why Kidane had been waiting for him at the base of the wall in her King Crab

King Crab. Heavy with a low center of gravity, it would stand up to the pounding of the river much better than his nimble *Grasshopper*. In a few seconds, sheer mass would trump agility.

But not quite yet.

David surged forward, sprinting toward Kidane for all he was worth, bobbing and weaving as she tracked him with both autocannons, her guns mercilessly flensing armor from his frame.

The water poured out of the wall now, its roar filling the canyon like an angry god too long imprisoned.

This fight was going to hell.

Still David *moved*.

It was what he was good at it.

He was inside Kidane's missile range now, but she still had the laser and those damn AC/20s.

The water swirled around his '*Hopper*'s ankles, slowing him down, costing him the deadly race with Kidane's guns.

And still the wall was too far away.

Too far.

He glanced at his wireframe just as it blinked from yellow to red.

Running out of time.

He jerked his '*Hopper*' right and up onto a rise in the river bed not yet submerged. Crouched.

And jumped.

And suddenly the dam was rushing toward him.

He soared up and up, straight up, body stretched, every muscles taut, willing the '*Hopper*' to make it, dammit, or he was going to be a very big bug on an even bigger windshield.

He sailed up, up, the ferrocrete rushing past him like a deadly river of rock, pulling closer and closer—

And suddenly he was over.

David tucked his 'Mech into a crouch and brought himself down on the dam's top, just a meter shy of the edge. For a second he tottered on the edge of disaster, and then he managed a step forward.

He pivoted, looked down.

Kidane was right below him, slowed by the torrent of water and not maneuverable enough to twist back and fire up at him.

She'd had the Blackstar emblem painted in the center of her giant, black carapace: a copper circle framing a black compass.

To David it looked like a target.

He leaned over and poured emerald fire into that target.

***Fight Complex, The Dam
Hoch Estate, Equatus, Solaris VII
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
2 April 3064***

After showering and changing into street clothes, David stepped out of the men's locker room. He was surprised to find that Marcy wasn't waiting for him. He frowned. Where was she?

She hadn't met him in the hangar after the fight, but she'd been there before, beautiful in a pale blue cotton sun dress that echoed the color of her eyes. She'd leaned forward to kiss him (that sweet smell) and then offered him the ribbon from her hair for good luck.

And now she was nowhere to be seen.

David sighed. She and Pitgar were surely working the media. Had to be. He'd just as soon avoid the reporters with their crass and obvious questions, but if he did that he'd have to wait to see Marcy. He squared his shoulders and went off to face the music.

A little smile tugged at the corners of his lips. He must really love her if he was willing to endure the chattering classes just for a chance to see her.

He moved down the hallway until he came to the executive conference room, pushed open one of the double mahogany doors. The room was crowded with thirty or forty reporters shouting questions, most of them about the dam's collapse.

Pitgar stood on a small dais, smiling widely, looking fat and sleek and very well satisfied.

A woman from the Solaran Broadcasting Corporation leaned forward and said, "Mr. Pitgar, was it the Songbird's intention to destroy the dam?"

"Songbird?" whispered one of the reporters in the back to a colleague standing next to him, giving voice to the same question Singh had.

"She's talking about Singh," the other reporter whispered back. "Because he flies like an angel and when Pitgar gives him the right music he sure can *sing*."

David frowned, getting the distinct impression that the reporter was making fun of him.

Pitgar was answering the first reporter's question—"there was no plan to hit the dam. David was aiming for the *King Crab*. It was only bad luck that the wall came down."

David was so annoyed with that answer that it took him several seconds to realize Marcy wasn't standing next to Pitgar.

That's when David felt his first stab of worry.

Her job was PR. Here they had a genuine news event that could be used to bolster Freak Show and David's career, and she wasn't there. It just didn't make sense.

David eased out of the room before anyone glanced back and recognized him. He moved down the hallway and bumped into a short man who worked in promotions.

"Have you seen Ms. Kessel?" David asked.

The man frowned. "I think she was going to watch the match in one of the conference rooms."

"Which one?" David didn't bother to keep the edge out of his voice.

"Uh, 2A, maybe. Or 2B."

"Right. Thanks." David moved on, turned down a second hallway toward the conference rooms (hurrying a little now) until he came to 2A. He pushed the door open and stepped inside.

A holoset was on—tuned to the press conference he'd just left—but otherwise the room was empty and he almost stepped back out again, but something stopped him. He glanced around.

A table lamp was knocked over.

David's mouth tasted dry.

Slowly he entered the room, moving warily.

There was something on the floor. He bent down and picked it up.

It was a ten-centimeter strip of cotton. It was pale blue (like Marcy's sun dress) except at the end where it was stained red-black.

Blood

David suddenly understood everything. What had Xu Longshen said? *We Maskirovka have many more weapons than assassination to enforce our will*

His fist closed around the cotton strip and suddenly his hand was shaking. He closed his eyes. *How could I be so stupid?*

Marcy was gone.

To be continued...