LION'S ROAR

Part Two

Steven Mohan, Jr.

BATTLECORPS

Hazelwood Flats, Black Hills
Solaris City, Solaris VII
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
5 April 3064

Before David Singh became David Singh, he was Ramesh da Silva, and the one thing Ramesh da Silva told himself to get through the hell that was the battle for Kaifeng was that he was a survivor. One might be inclined to forgive da Silva this little conceit, because based on all available evidence he seemed to be right.

After all, da Silva survived rip-roaring drunks, encounters with unwholesome women, and the muggings that inevitably resulted from the mixing of the two. He even survived House Hiritsu's best attempt to kill him, a spray of machine gun fire from a LCT-1V *Locust* that had smashed through the starred cockpit of his beloved *'Hopper* and sliced the left side of his command couch to ribbons. And yet only a single shell pierced da Silva's body.

The first one.

It was late in the day and the battered Capellan 'Mech was running hot, too hot, apparently, to use its Martell Medium Laser, but the enemy pilot must have seen da Saliva's damaged canopy and decided to try for a head shot. Because the *Locust* turned and took aim with its machine guns. There was an instant of silence, and then the universe filled with the chatter of automatic weapons fire and the tinkle of broken glass.

The line of angry metal punched through da Silva's canopy.

The first round through began its life as a brass-jacketed steel bullet, but its passage through the ferroglass of da Silva's canopy robbed it of most of its kinetic energy and tore it into a jagged piece of burnished metal. The slug ricocheted off the steel frame of da Silva's couch and cut up, slicing through flesh and impacting da Silva's fifth rib.

For a time measured in milliseconds, da Silva's life hung in the balance.

All the shell had to do was bounce left, cutting up through the thoracic cavity and it would've sliced through his left lung, punctured his heart, ripped through his trachea, his soft palate, and finally his brain, on its way out of the top of his skull.

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Instead it bounced right.

Clearing his body and burying itself in the bulkhead of his cockpit.

That was the first shot of a steady stream of heavy metal that tore into da Silva's confined world as the Capellan warrior in the *Locust* held the shot for several long seconds. The enemy pilot's control was astounding; even as he fell back the stream of shells hit the exact same place: the steel frame of the command couch, mere centimeters from da Silva's bare skin.

Those shells all bounced right, too.

Until the line of death arced away from him as the *Locust* turned to engage another target.

This was exactly the kind of incident that might convince someone he was invincible, or at least very, very lucky.

But Ramesh da Silva never had to face what David Singh endured now.

David's hand shook as he tried to slip the key card into his apartment's card reader. After the third try, he stopped and sucked in a deep, shuddery breath. Brushed the sheen of sweat from his face and just focused on breathing.

The fact that he was having flashbacks to his life as da Silva was a very bad sign. He wasn't just recalling these long-buried memories, he was *reliving* them. Damn it, he could smell the chemical stink of cordite, feel the line of fire slicing through his flesh, hear the whine of the shell's ricochets, the terror as alive and tangible as it had been six years ago.

It had been 48 hours since Marcy had disappeared, and already he was losing his mind.

He was wired for sound. Strung out. He couldn't think and he couldn't sleep. He couldn't stop moving, constantly in motion, a hunter without prey, pacing back and forth like a great cat caught in a small cage. He felt like a piano wire, a long string of perfectly formed steel stretched impossibly tight.

David could feel the moment coming when he would snap.

The only thought that held him together, that stopped him from slipping into an orgy of mindless violence aimed at the nearest representative of the Capellan regime, was the realization that it would do Marcy absolutely no good. She was out there somewhere.

And she needed him.

If they hurt her…

His mouth tasted dry. He couldn't finish the thought. His mind just blanked. Literally blanked. If they hurt her *he didn't know what he'd do*.

She needed him. He clung to that idea. It was the only thing that tethered him to sanity. Sure as hell no one else was going to help her. Solaris was a Lyran world, but Solaris City itself was divided into five sections, each one dominated by one of the successor states, and each with its own police force.

It turned out that five police forces were worse than none. They couldn't bring themselves to cooperate, and they blocked him from using Pitgar's underworld contacts to find her.

And the worst part, the *very worst part* of the nightmare was *it was all his fault*

David had seen Xu. Spoken with him. He knew what the Mask agent was capable of, and yet he hadn't warned Marcy, hadn't even considered the possibility that she might be in danger.

She was a PR consultant, for God's sake. The Maskirovka would break her like a twig. And for what? Just to get at him.

His fault.

He slammed his fist into the wall and pain lanced up his arm.

David shook his head. *Come on, you're no good to her like this. Get some rest and then maybe you can think of something*. He pulled out the key card again and this time managed to open the door.

It swung open on inky darkness and David stepped inside. It was a little disorienting. He hadn't been back to his apartment in a week. Lately he'd been spending his nights at Marcy's gorgeous Silesian flat.

He fumbled for the light switch for a second before he remembered that in *his* apartment the switch was on the *left*. He finally found it and clicked the lights on.

His gaze drifted over his place: hideous pea green wall paper, threadbare orange shag carpet, old rust-colored sofa, and a black leather recliner with Xu Longshen sitting in it.

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David lunged.

Xu raised a pistol.

David froze, staring down the barrel of the weapon. "You can't kill me," he said slowly and carefully, not sure who he was trying to convince, him or Xu. "If you do, everyone will blame my death on the Maskirovka."

"I don't *want* to kill you, it's true," said Xu. "You're a black mark on my record, David Singh, one I wish to remove. But rest assured, if you charge me again I'll put a bullet in you before you take a single step."

"You're placing your life above the welfare of the Confederation," said David. "I wonder what Sun Tzu would say about that?"

"Oh, I love the Confederation, but—" Xu shrugged and his lips quirked into an ironic smile. "No reason to be a fanatic about it."

David stood rooted to the floor, considering. Maybe three meters separated him from Xu. And the Mask agent might be bluffing.

Might be.

He didn't move.

"What have you done with Marcy?" he said roughly.

"Ah," said Xu, "right to the matter at hand. Not very traditional, but I like it nonetheless. It betrays a certain focus, a certain *pragmatism* that I have always admired in you."

"*Xu*," Singh croaked. He felt his hold on reality slipping. In a minute, maybe two, he was going to stop caring whether the Mask agent would shoot him when he charged.

"You know, you really ought to thank me for taking her. I told you the truth at the hospital. She is working against your best interests."

"If you hurt her…" It came out as a growl, low in his throat.

Xu laughed, a buoyant, joyful sound. "Oh, my dear stupid boy, how little you understand. I have *already* hurt her, more than you can possibly imagine."

David screamed and lunged.

The pistol coughed once.

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And David's left knee exploded with pain. Suddenly the joint wouldn't hold his weight. He crumpled to the floor.

"Now," said Xu in a perfectly calm voice, "would you like to discuss the woman's fate, or should we play more silly games?"

Pain rippled through David's body. It had nothing to do with his knee.

Marcy

"I see you don't feel much like conversation." Xu stood. "That's fine. I'll do all the talking. I'm afraid the question is no longer whether or not I will hurt your beloved Marcy Kessel. That ship, as they say, has sailed." Xu's voice tightened into something cold and reptilian. "Way, way out to sea. No, the question now is whether or not I will *kill* her. Would you like to hear the good news?"

David grunted.

"The good news is that you get to choose."

"Let her go, you *bastard*," David managed from between clenched teeth.

"Of course," said Xu amiably, "if you promise to do one small thing for me."

David craned his neck back so he could look up at the Maskirovka agent's face.

Xu smiled. "Stop fighting."

"*What?*"

"Oh, I'd rather have you come and fight for a Capellan stable—"

"*I'll never fight for you*," David spat.

"—but that seems somewhat unlikely, so I'll be happy if you simply agree to stop fighting altogether."

David's breath caught in his chest. His knee throbbed with pain and the room closed in around him. *Fighting was his life.*

But he couldn't let Marcy die. It was his fault they'd taken her. In his mind's eye he saw Xu yank down on her long, dark hair, jerking her head back, exposing that slim, graceful neck. He saw the dull glint of burnished steel against her pale flesh.

He closed his eyes against the vision.

"You know I'll do it," said Xu softly.

"I— I agree." David choked the words out.

"Very good, David. Very good. With most people I would ask them to make a formal announcement to the press, but you, *you* I trust. Because you know if you ever go back on your word, we will get to her again."

"*Yes.*" The word tasted bitter in his mouth.

"Then we have an understanding, and the Capellan Confederation's business with you is concluded."

"You promised to release her," David croaked.

"But David, she is already released." Xu reached into an inner pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out an envelope, tossing it on the floor a few centimeters from David's head. "Here is the address where you'll find her. Right now she's lying in an alley just off Max Liao Avenue in Cathay. Not a very good part of town, I'm afraid, but she *is* free. She should be fine—" He raised an eyebrow. "—*if* you get to her soon."

And then Xu Longshen stepped past David and walked out of the apartment, his merry laughter following him out.

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Maximillian Liao Avenue, Cathay
Solaris City, Solaris VII
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
5 April 3064

The storm was doing its best to wash Maximillian Liao clean, but some things were beyond even nature's ability. The clean, sharp smell of rain covered up the odor of garbage and piss, and the drizzle had chased most of the street's denizens indoors, or at least sent them scurrying for cover. But in the end it was like dressing a hooker in an elegant, black evening gown; the cleansing only served to highlight what Max Liao really was.

A place that was home to two kinds of people: the desperate and the monstrous.

The low clouds hid the stars, leaving no illumination but the dim, orange glow of sodium streetlamps. In the hellish half-light, the dark tenements that flanked the narrow road looked like immense creatures waiting to snatch up the unwary passerby.

And David was sure the danger wasn't just in his head.

He struggled down the rain-slick street (no sidewalks on the south end of Max Liao) throwing his left shoulder forward, planting his crutch, and swinging the right side of his body in line with the left.

The crutch was an old thing he'd dug out of a closet, junk from an earlier arena injury. He should've thrown it out long ago. The rubber tip on the foot was worn through to bare metal, and the padding on its top was so thin that it dug into his left armpit each time the crutch hit the ground.

But it was all he had.

Twice the crutch slipped on the treacherous pavement. Once he'd caught himself, twisting his body to avoid the fall and subjecting his knee to a wrenching agony that almost brought him down anyway.

The second time he wasn't so lucky.

Gravity yanked him down, cracking the wounded knee against the hard pavement. David gasped. The world became incandescent white fire. Then it snapped to black.

The cold touch of rain on his face jerked David back to himself. He wasn't sure how long he'd lain in the middle of the street, but it must've been only a few minutes. No one had come by to slit his throat.

Somehow he managed to lever himself to his feet, trying to ignore the throb of his abused knee. He took a creaky step forward. His knee screamed in protest, but he ignored it.

And took another step.

Marcy needed him.

Xu had been true to his word. There had been an address in the envelope: 319 Max Liao. David was even willing to wager the purse of his next fight—

(Except there would be no next fight.)

—that the address was correct. But the joke was on him. Very few of the run-down buildings in this part of Cathay had numbers, and those that did were almost impossible to see in the dark.

Ahead, David saw a slim form huddled under a narrow awning jutting from a brick building. *Woman*. He could tell by the soft shape of the body, by the way she held herself.

His heart leapt.

Please let it be Marcy.

He reached down into the pocket of his overcoat, right hand closing around the grip of his slug thrower.

Just in case.

The woman was dressed in something scarlet and sparkly. "Looking for some company, big man?"

David jerked the weapon up, shoved the barrel in the hooker's face.

Her eyes widened and she shrank back. When he maneuvered his body past the awning, she darted away. David didn't bother to turn and watch her flight, but he tracked her departure by the staccato clicking of her heels against the sidewalk.

He didn't have time for the creatures of the night.

Not now.

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He grunted as he pushed his way down the street, breathing hard but making steady progress despite the mess that was his left knee. He'd been lucky there. The bullet had ricocheted off his kneecap and back out. His knee was a mess now, but it would probably heal fine. He'd coated it with a topical antibiotic, bandaged it, and swallowed a handful of painkillers. He'd have to go to the hospital eventually, but his battlefield first aid was enough to get him up and out the door.

He had to get to Marcy.

He sure as hell wasn't going to trust the Cathay police to save her.

David saw a flash of silver-orange. A building number: 298. *Getting close*.

There. An alley. A black mouth yawned between two run-down brick buildings. It was hard to tell for sure in the rain, but David thought this might be the place.

It's a trap.

He took a single step into the alley and his shoe slipped in something slippery,

something wretched and foul. He was assaulted by the smell of filth. The alley must've been covered, because as he took his second step the steady tapping of the rain faded a bit, replaced by the sound of water gushing out of a downspout.

Another step.

He swallowed in a dry throat.

He'd brought a flashlight with him, but if he turned it on, he'd be an instant target for anyone with a weapon. Of course that was nothing but pure paranoia. If the Maskirovka had wanted him dead, Xu could have killed him back at the apartment.

(Except here it would look like a street crime.)

David kept the flashlight off.

Crept forward.

A little of the street lamp's orange light leaked into the alley, just enough that he could begin to make out vague shapes as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Was that . . Was that something? He

saw a patch of black on black, something that might be a person sprawled in the muck

But he still couldn't see into the darkness beyond. David shivered. He had the uncomfortable feeling that someone was watching him from the back of the alley. *Your mind's playing tricks on you, David.*

(Or is it?)

He drew a deep breath. It would be harder to target a voice than a beam of light. "Marcy," he whispered.

The patch of black whimpered, and all considerations of personal safety melted away. David flicked his flashlight on and hobbled towards her as fast as he could. He knelt in a thin pool of fetid water, put his hand on her shoulder.

She felt cold.

How long had she been out here?

He clamped the flashlight under his right armpit and leaned in, reaching forward with a shaking hand and smoothing away the chocolate-colored hair from her face. Her jaw was marked by an ugly purple blotch fading to sour yellow. There was another bruise high on her right cheekbone. And the line of her nose was just *wrong*. Then she caught him with those clear, blue eyes. She looked at him wide and vacant,

(shocked)

and then her face crumpled into an alien expression that might've been a bizarre mixture of relief and terror. David couldn't be sure. All he could do was crush her to him.

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Hanse Davion Medical Center
Black Hills, Solaris City, Solaris VII
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
5 April 3064

In their own particular way, doctors were dictators every bit as ruthless and uncompromising as the monster who sat on the Celestial Throne. And so David wasn't allowed to check on Marcy until his knee had been x-rayed and stitched up and immobilized and injected with antibiotics and injected again, this time with an industrial strength analgesic. (Why didn't they do those last two in reverse order? Don't bother to even ask because you're not a *doctor.*)

Only then did they let him hobble up to the ICU where Marcy rested in a private room.

David found Michael Pitgar sitting outside her door, wedged into a small chair that did not quite accommodate his impressive bulk. Trapped deep in the unsavory heart of Cathay, it was Pitgar David had called for help. And it was Pitgar who had come.

The big man rose from his chair. "What did they say about the knee?"

"Four to six weeks," said David impatiently.

"*Four to six—*" Pitgar forked his fingers through thinning hair, a sure sign he was agitated. "David, you never should've gone into that alley by yourself. Why didn't you call me earlier? Now your return to the arena will be delayed."

David remembered his promise to Xu and almost said that his return to the arena would be delayed quite a bit longer than four to six weeks, but this was neither the time nor the place for *that* discussion. "I was shot in the knee *before* I went into the alley, remember?"

Pitgar rolled his eyes. "And I'm sure hopping around on rain-slicked streets in the Cathay slums was the very best thing for it."

David looked around the hallway, uncomfortably aware that this was the very same hospital where he'd first seen Xu Longshen after the Mask agent's failed attempt to kill him during the Grand Melee.

The hall was empty except for an African woman sleeping in another of the uncomfortable chairs two doors down. "Michael, we need to get some guards down here. What if the Mask tries something?"

"And what would they try? Xu could've killed both you and Marcy tonight and he let you both go. Why try something now?"

"*Damn it, Michael*"

Pitgar chuckled. "Why don't you go wake up the young black woman sleeping in that chair?"

"I don't—"

Pitgar stopped him with a raised eyebrow.

David frowned, but he hobbled over to where the sleeping woman was sprawled out. He hadn't closed to within two meters when she said, "Good evening, Mr. Singh," in a low, even voice, all without giving the slightest indication she was awake.

David opened his mouth to respond, but closed it again when he saw her move her head slightly from side to side. The movement had only been a few millimeters, invisible from the nurse's station down the hall, but the message was clear enough. She didn't want him to speak.

David turned and walked back to Pitgar.

"How many?" he asked in a low voice.

"Five," said Pitgar, "on this floor alone. More in the lobby. If the Mask tries anything they will find that they've made a hideous mistake."

Doubtless Pitgar had actually stationed the guards here to protect himself. It couldn't have escaped his attention that helping David might put him in the Maskirovka's cross-hairs, but right now David didn't care about the promoter's cynical motives. He was helping protect Marcy. That was enough. "Thank you, Michael," David said, his voice hoarse with feeling.

Pitgar looked at once uncomfortable and sad, and David almost would've sworn that he was seeing a real human emotion.

Would wonders never cease?

"Mr. Singh?"

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David turned and saw a severe woman in her fifties step out of Marcy's room. She wore a white coat over blue jeans and a yellow-print blouse, dark red hair pulled into a tight bun, and no makeup. "I am Dr. O'Neill. I have been treating Ms. Kessel. I understand you brought her in?"

David nodded. "Yes. Is she—" His mouth tasted like cotton. "Is she going to be all right?"

The doctor nodded. "Yes, she will recover. But someone worked her over pretty good, Mr. Singh. Her right radius is broken, two broken ribs. Severe contusions and what look like electrical burn marks."

David closed his eyes and swayed. He felt Michael's hand on his shoulder.

"This is all my fault," David whispered.

"How's that?" the doctor asked sharply.

"I—" David opened his eyes, met the doctor's hard, angry gaze. *She thinks I did this. Thinks I hurt Marcy* And then a little voice said, *Didn't you?* "The Maskirovka threatened me. I didn't see that if they couldn't get to me, they would hurt someone I loved."

The doctor's face softened at the mention of the Maskirovka. Well, Black Hills *was* the Fed Suns quarter of Solaris City. "How did you come to make enemies of the Mask?"

"I was born on Sarna."

Understanding lighted the woman's eyes. She drew a deep breath and looked over at Pitgar. *There's something she's not telling me*.

David glanced back at Pitgar in time to see him nod.

"Mr. Singh," said the doctor slowly and the bottom fell out of David's stomach. "There were signs of... sexual assault." She paused. "Damage."

David squeezed his eyes shut, trying to shut out the words, shut out the truth. He suddenly found he couldn't breathe. The doctor's clinical voice grew distant, drowned out by the painful beating of his heart.

He heard the hateful sound of Xu's voice: *Oh, my dear stupid boy, how little you understand. I have* already *hurt her, more than you can possibly imagine*.

"Mr. Singh? Are you all right?"

David realized the doctor was looking up at him, her eyebrows drawn together in concern. He shook his head, coming back to himself. "Can I see her?" he asked roughly.

The doctor nodded. "She's been asking for you. Just, please—" She stopped abruptly.

"She's been through a lot," said Pitgar softly.

Rage spiked in David's heart, and it took him a moment for him to fight it down. He didn't need Pitgar to tell him that. *He had been there.* But he wasn't really angry at Michael Pitgar. David flexed his hands and closed them into fists.

He was angry at Xu Longshen.

He filled his chest with a deep breath, nodded at Pitgar. "I understand."

David went to the door to Marcy's room and stopped. He took another deep breath and pushed in.

And there was Marcy.

She lay in a hospital bed, a beige blanket pulled up to her chest. She wore a thin hospital gown (a pale blue print with little flowers) and she appeared to be sleeping. In the light she looked far worse than she had in the alley. Aside from the bruises her lip had been split and her pretty nose had been smashed into a misshapen lump of flesh.

And those were just the injuries he could see.

David just stood there.

(Terrified.)

He didn't want to wake her. She obviously needed her rest.

So he jumped when she croaked, "Who's there?"

"D-David."

"David?" She opened her eyes. "Really?" She saw him, and suddenly her face lit up with a smile and she was beautiful again despite the bruises and all the terrible things that had been done to her.

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David took a step forward and stopped. He fought down the sudden urge to confess. No, dammit. He wasn't going to burden her with his need for absolution. Not when she was so badly hurt.

"I-I didn't want to wake you."

"You came for me," she whispered. "You *saved* me."

"I—" David stopped. He didn't know what to say. He *hadn't* saved her. It was his fault that she was laying broken in this hospital bed.

But he couldn't say that to her, couldn't say any of it.

"David?" She tilted her head, worry etched into the lines of her face.

He didn't know how to ease that worry. Not without telling her the terrible truth. Not without lying. And he would not do either. His hands clenched into fists at his side.

It was his lie, his failure to tell her about Xu that had bought her a ticket to this nightmare. Yes, it had only been a lie of omission, but that didn't change the fact that she'd been horribly brutalized, and it was his doing.

He clenched his jaw. He would never again allow a lie to come between them.

So he just stood there, frozen. Unable to move or speak or even think.

"David?" He heard the tears in her voice before he saw them filling her eyes. "You don't love me any more," she whispered. "Because of what they did."

"*No,*" David barked, and he crossed the room and crushed her in a hug. "No no no *no.*"

She clung to him, her body shaking with sobs. David hugged her tightly, trying to give her what strength he had to offer.

The words just poured out of her, coming between the sobs. "I didn't know what they wanted and they were hurting me and I was so afraid and—"

"*Shh,*" David whispered. "I know. It's OK now. Everything's OK now."

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He held her for a long time until she finally stopped trembling. She pulled back and looked up at him. "W-why were you acting so strange?"

"I—" And just like that he was locked up again.

Sometimes, late in a battle, there was a moment when a 'Mech would take a shot to a missile magazine and for a heartbeat time would freeze. Then the moment would pass and a massive secondary explosion would rip the great machine apart. That was what David felt like. He could feel the pressure building in his chest.

Just waiting to pour its destructive energy out.

He shook his head. "I can't."

She looked up at him and placed a warm hand on his cheek. "You have to."

"It's not fair to you."

"Let it out," she whispered.

"This," he said, and his voice cracked. "This is all my fault."

She frowned, shook her head. "No. You *saved* me."

Apropos of nothing, David thought of the duel with the *Locust* so long ago, remembered the terror of that shell dancing around his cockpit. For the first time since that day, he wished the shell had killed him.

He licked his lips. Tried to muster some moisture in a dry mouth. "The men who abducted you. They were Mask agents."

"You don't know that," she said, stroking his face.

"After the brawl, when I was in the hospital—" David swallowed. "Just before you took me home. Xu Longshen threatened me."

She looked stricken. "He— He told you he was going to abduct me?"

"*No. If I'd had known that—*"

She put a slim finger over his lips. "Then it's not your fault."

"But if I had quit fighting then they never would've taken you."

"Quit fighting *then?* David you didn't agree to quit fighting, did you?"

"*I had to*. It was the price for your life."

"But I'm safe now. You don't have to go through with it."

"*Yes I do*." He couldn't keep the anguish out of his voice. "How could I live with myself if I went back to the arena and something happened to you?"

She studied him for a long moment, searching his face with those clear blue eyes. "I know what *Singh* means."

He blinked. "Marcy, that doesn't—"

"It means *lion*. And you *are* a lion. Nothing's ever been handed to you, David. You've fought for everything you've ever gotten." She touched his face. "That's what I love about you. I could never let you give that up. It would be like letting you die." She shook her head. "Now promise me you won't give up fighting."

"*Marcy*."

"*Promise*."

He bent down and stopped her mouth with a kiss, but he didn't allow himself to believe that he had escaped that promise. He couldn't. He'd vowed there would be no more lies.

Not even to himself.

Prefight Ready Room, The Harbor Equatus, Solaris VII Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance 17 May 3064

David stepped out of the locker room dressed only in a pair of khaki shorts and his cooling vest.

A salacious smile curled Marcy's red lips. "Now that's what I like to see."

He chuckled. "You *do* know I have to go fight?"

She just raised an eyebrow suggestively.

David burst out laughing. It was a tempting offer, even if he knew she was just joking. She looked stunning in navy capris and a sky blue polo shirt. Her dark hair was tied up with a beautiful blue ribbon that matched the shirt. Her bruises had faded away and her nose had been reconstructed.

David laughed as he pulled on his combat boots. "Any hints about what I'll face today?"

She smiled mischievously. "You know I can't tell you anything."

David flashed her a lopsided grin. "I just want to know if I'm going to get my head bashed in."

"No need to worry about *that*," said Marcy. "You're Pitgar's meal ticket—he's arranged for a fair fight."

David snorted. "You're telling me I'm finally going to get an even match."

Marcy giggled. "I didn't say even, I said fair."

David's answering chuckle felt hollow in his chest. Marcy must've heard it in his voice because she frowned and said, "What is it? Does your knee feel OK?"

"My knee is fine."

"Then what?"

David hesitated.

Marcy folded her arms across her chest. "*No*," she said firmly.

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"The Mask has a thousand tentacles, Marcy. Even here on Solaris. Anyone could be a Mask agent."

She frowned and shook her head. "The Maskirovka are nothing more than a bunch of bullies. They'll back down if you stand up to them."

David frowned. He wanted to believe her, but . . . "My success is an embarrassment to the regime. More so since Xu tried to have me killed and failed so publicly." David shook his head. "I think he'd do just about anything to wipe that black mark off his record."

"David, you've beaten Xu at every turn. At some point he's going to cut his losses."

David looked into those pretty blue eyes, remembering the shock and terror in them when he'd found her in the alley, and he wondered if he'd ever really beaten Xu at all. "Look, once I step onto that battlefield there's no going back."

"You promised you would fight."

"I know, but—"

She stepped forward and slid her arms around his waist. Looked into his eyes "This is hard," she whispered. "For me, too."

He saw the muscles of her face tighten. For a moment she looked gaunt.

Afraid.

David couldn't believe how completely he'd been fooled. All her brave talk was just a front.

And yet she still wanted him to fight.

"Do you think I've forgotten what happened after your last fight?" she asked with a little waver in her voice. "I have to live with what they did to me for the rest of my life. But if we don't find a way to get past it, they win."

He touched her face. "I just couldn't stand it if something happened to you."

"It's a risk," she admitted. "But I need your support. If you can't be strong for yourself, be strong for me." She pulled her pale blue ribbon from her hair, letting her long, dark tresses fall to her

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shoulders. Then she tucked the slim strip of satin under his cooling vest.

And David knew he had no choice, but to fight.

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BattleMech Staging Area, The Harbor
Equatus, Solaris VII
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
17 May 3064

The Harbor was too small an arena to have separate hangars for the opposing 'Mechs, so Pitgar had instructed David to arrive no earlier than eleven a.m. on pain of death. No doubt to keep the latest trick a surprise.

By the time David strolled into the staging area the cavernous hangar was empty except for his *Grasshopper* and the Freak Show support crew. He was so focused on his beautiful 'Mech that he smacked right into a short, stocky man going the other way.

The man apologized quickly and walked off.

David glanced back at him, a slow smile spreading across his face. He recognized the man's stocky frame, his bald head, his chestnut colored skin, his stolid gait. The man he'd bumped into had to be Tobias Nerrivik, one of the better Fitzhugh techs.

Which meant that he would be facing George Adlet.

Adlet was a Greenlander and an Inuit. He was a calm and clever opponent, one of Fitzhugh's rising stars. He had the kind of patience needed to successfully hunt seal and bear among the ice flows of Terra's Arctic north. In and of itself, this made Adlet dangerous, but there was more to the story. Adlet's plain face, his clear brown eyes, his taciturn manner convinced others that he lacked intelligence or imagination.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

David had never met Adlet in the arena, but he'd studied enough of the man's tapes to know this might be his most difficult fight ever.

Adlet piloted a *Zeus,* on the face of it a heavier and more capable 'Mech than David's *'Hopper*. So he would have to use guile and speed to win. Well, it wouldn't be the first time. No doubt Pitgar had booked Adlet hoping for a fight like the one David had put up against the *Atlas,* the heroic loss that had put David Singh's name on everyone's lips.

David smiled to himself. He'd give Solaris all that and more.

This time he was going to win.

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The Harbor
Equatus, Solaris VII
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The Harbor was an arena like no other on Solaris. First, it was not located on the continent of Grayland like most of the world's gaming venues. It was tucked away on the southern continent of Equatus, hidden among the estates and vineyards of the Solaran upper class. But what really made it unique was its geography.

The region had been shaped by the planet's last ice age, some ten thousand years before, when a period of intense glaciation sent great masses of ice north from the south pole to scour the landscape. Those glaciers had melted away millennia before, but the land still bore their stamp, great gouges torn out of the landscape as if some long-ago giant had dined on the earth's flesh.

Just west of the scarred landscape was a shallow inland bay that, despite its name, would've made a terrible harbor. Access to the sea was largely blocked by a series of barrier islands that mirrored the coastline proper, turning The Harbor into a rough circle. And it was too shallow for normal shipping. During low tide (and they were just an hour off low tide now) the Harbor was no more than ten or twelve meters deep at its deepest and considerably shallower elsewhere. Bad for deep draft vessels.

But perfect for hiding an assault 'Mech.

It was here that David expected to find Adlet.

The Inuit would make David come to him, hoping for a slugfest that would leave David's lighter 'Mech battered and broken. A grim smile touched his lips. Well they would just see about that.

He crested a big hill and looked over the broken landscape at the shallow bay below, spent a second watching the sunlight sparkle of the water like spun gold against liquid sapphire.

David had learned from his experience at The Dam. He'd loaded a chart of the bay itself into his tactical computer and studied it as his *'Hopper* powered to life. Likely spots for an ambush were already marked with a red "X" on the—

A shrill jump tone shocked him out of his reverie.

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Target lock.

His eyes jerked down to his rear monitor.

In time to see the sinuous shape of a light 'Mech.

Then ruby fire from the large laser that was the 'Mech's right arm sliced into his *'Hopper'*'s vulnerable rear armor.

David took a step forward and pivoted quickly. Unable to understand what he was seeing. Adlet pilots an assault machine

He dropped his reticle over the light machine, but it suddenly shot up on pillars of golden plasma. The emerald light of David's laser slashed uselessly through the space the enemy machine had occupied only a second before.

For a second, he watched the strange-looking machine silhouetted against the clear blue sky. The cockpit was a bulbous glob of metal that somehow still managed to look sleek set on a pair of chicken legs. No, David thought, *not* chicken legs. Those legs belong to some kind of deadly predator, like a *Velociraptor*.

That's a *Spector*.

David scowled. No wonder it managed to sneak up on me.

The SPR-5F *Spector* was a tough little machine: The Nightwind Large Laser built into its right arm was its principal weapon, but it also sported three smaller lasers. Worst of all, it carried a Norse Guardian ECM that made it very difficult to detect.

This one had been painted in odd colors that David didn't recognize: the raptor legs were pale blue and a giant red dot was painted in the center of the *Spector*'s face right below the canopy. The rest of 'Mech was painted bone white. David noticed a legend in black lettering at the 'Mech's waist. He snapped a still and increased magni—

This time it was the shrill call of his MAD detector that alerted him to the enemy.

David wheeled in time to see a thirty-five-ton *Talon* in the same absurd paint job as the *Spector* setting up for a shot.

He hit his jump jets, just a small hop to the right, but good enough to avoid the azure line of death that sizzled through the air. Then he immediately hit back with his lasers, not even waiting for his *'Hopper* to settle to the ground.

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David's shot savaged the armor over the *Talon*'s right arm actuator just as he hit the earth. He took the impact in a crouch, but instead of bracing himself to regain his balance, he stepped down on his foot pedals, pushing his machine into another hop, this one forward left.

Just as the *Talon* pilot missed again with his Lord's Light PPC.

David instantly hit again, this time with LRMs instead of lasers to cut down on the heat washing through his cockpit. At 270 meters, the light machine was well within his missile firing arc, meaning the warheads wouldn't have time to arm, but they would still deliver a kinetic energy of one-half em vee squared, and there was a hell of a lot vee squared.

The LRMs hit dead on, rippling across the unfortunate *Talon*'s chest and smashing armor. More importantly, the light 'Mech stumbled backwards.

Buying David another couple seconds.

Which he used to cut deeply into the *Talon*'s right arm actuator. Plates of Kallon Light Shield A bubbled and smoked as David held the shot, melting armor right off the little machine's right arm.

That was enough for the enemy pilot. The *Talon* was well-armored and well-armed for a light 'Mech, but it still gave up thirty-five tons to a *Grasshopper*, and if it stuck around David was going to smash it to bits.

The lightweight pivoted and darted away, coming up quickly to its 130 kph max speed and racing for an opening between two ridges.

David took a step to follow and then stopped himself.

So far, the assault against him had been masterfully planned. The *Spector* had snuck up and hit him from behind. When he turned to engage the little thing nipping at his heels, the *Talon* had tried to dart in for another strike.

Doubtless if he followed it through that little opening in the rock wall, he'd run himself right into the enemy's guns. He was facing multiple light 'Mechs who were trying to wear him down with hit and fade tactics.

Just what he'd do if he were facing a heavier, better armed opponent.

So Pitgar *did* want a rematch of his bout with the *Atlas*, only this time he was cast in the role of big, bad bully.

Fine. He'd give them all the bully they could handle.

He raced toward the opening the *Talon* had used to escape and then hit his jump jets at the last second, sending him skyward. He came down *on the ridge* and saw a little twenty-ton *Flea* below using a copse of trees for cover.

Eyes flickered down to the range finder.

549 meters.

Perfect

He dropped his reticle over the bottom of the light 'Mech's boxy shape, targeting the pale blue hip joint, and let loose with his LRMs.

The missiles streaked straight in, tearing into the little machine's light armor.

The *Flea* staggered left.

David hit him again.

Armor spalled off the damaged joint, revealing the glint of ferro-titanium beneath. David grinned.

And hit the *Flea* again.

Just as the enemy pilot did the exact wrong thing. He turned to Light 'Mech 101: when faced with a superior opponent, flee. The boxy *Flea* pivoted, just as David's large laser cut right into the vulnerable hipbone.

The metallic joint snapped.

And the *Flea* crashed to the ground.

David hit his jump jets and leapt down from the ridge line, landed in a crouch, and then bounded forward eating up the distance between him and his prey in giant strides that shook the earth.

The sight must have completely unnerved the other pilot, because he heard a panicked voice call over the pilot channel: "Referee this is Donkova. I surrender."

"Roger, Aggressor Four," answered the Referee, and then David heard someone swearing in the background, and the channel went dead.

Aggressor Four. That was a slip, and Singh would've bet quite a lot of money that it was Pitgar who was swearing. Now he knew

that they'd sent a lance of light 'Mechs against him. With the *Flea* down that left three: the *Spector,* the *Talon,* and a player to be named later.

Which didn't mean defeating them would be an easy task. The *Spector* and the *Talon* were tough little customers. And even if number three were on the light side of the class, they still had half again as much weight as he did.

What had Marcy said? *I didn't say even, I said fair*

It might help if he knew who he was fighting. David peered down at the crippled *Flea*. It boasted the same bizarre paint job as its brethren, but David's lasers had scorched the paint enough to make the legend painted on its boxy surface unreadable.

He called up the still he'd taken of the *Spector* and magnified the words, but the machine was twisted away from him. The legend was long, perhaps a sentence. He couldn't make out much of it but he thought he saw an "Li." (Light?)

No help there.

So. He was going to have to do this without hints.

David called up several maps and charts of the surrounding terrain, scrolling through them as he looked for something very specific.

After a few minutes, a grim smile tightened his face.

Perfect.

❖   ❖   ❖

David crouched his *Grasshopper* in the deep water of The Harbor, leaving only the top half of it's head visible above the calm, blue water, a couple meters of 'Mech lost in the glare of sun on water. His three opponents would have a hard time finding him. The water masked and diffused the heat signature of his reactor, and since he wasn't moving he wasn't cutting the planetary lines of magnetic force, which meant a MAD gear detection would be problematic. He wasn't radiating, so they wouldn't pick him up on passive sensors, and his faint radar signature would most likely be lost in sea clutter.

To his opponents, it would seem that David Singh had just disappeared.

Leaving them with nothing to do but scout.

Ten minutes ticked by, and David started to worry. This was a holovised match, after all. If he delayed too long, Pitgar might feel the need to give his little helpers a hint.

Another five minutes slipped past, and David toyed with the idea of energizing his radar for a second-long burst to draw his prey in. But if he did that, he might ruin the surprise. He pursed his lips and his hand settled on the radar selector switch.

Just as a *Scarabus* stalked into view.

It sported the same stupid paint job as the other three lights. It came over a ridge and slowly moved down a gentle hill that sloped down towards the water. The land was smooth and even, meaning that should the *Scarabus* stumble into the heavier *Grasshopper* it would have a clear avenue of retreat. But it meant one other thing, too.

David had a clear line of sight.

The *Scarabus* drew closer.

David's hand closed around his main trigger.

The light machine reached the edge of the water and drifted along the shoreline, moving towards a spot directly in front of David.

"Come on, come on," David whispered.

He'd picked this spot because it was almost exactly 400 meters from the shoreline. Perfect for his long-range missiles. Not so good for a machine only armed with two medium and two small lasers.

The *Scarabus* continued on its path. Slowly.

David's index finger caressed the raised red plastic surface of his main trigger. *Come on*

The *Scarabus* took another step.

David's finger jerked, launching a full flight of LRMs.

The *Scarabus*'s head swiveled left, its pilot suddenly aware of the threat. It got its left arm up just in time to take the brunt of the missile attack. Orange fireballs bloomed along the length of the square limb that housed all of the light 'Mech's weapons save its hatchet.

Heat spiked in David's cockpit as the missiles exhaust gasses poured heat into the *'Hopper*'s head, but his heat sinks were aided by the 43-degree water of The Harbor. His cooling system jerked the temperature down.

And David hit the *Scarabus* again.

Mangling the arm.

And effectively ending the *Scarabus*'s role in the day's festivities.

David stood and waded forward. And used his lasers to carve into the armor protecting the *Scarabus*'s left knee. He knew the light machine was out of the fight, so he wasn't attacking to disable it.

He was attacking to sow panic.

The *Scarabus* wheeled and kicked its speed up.

David struck it with another flight of missiles.

The *Scarabus* had pushed its speed well over 100 kph when the missiles hit and the sudden impact knocked it on its face. The force of the little machine's fall vibrated through the hills.

David felt the tremors rippling through his legs as his *'Hopper* cleared the shoreline.

He looked up just as the *Talon* skylined itself on the ridge.

Just what David had been waiting for. He sent a flight of missiles smashing into the *Scarabus*'s would-be rescuer and then jumped.

The *Talon* had expected him to do a little hop, and had aimed his extended range PPC at a spot five meters to his right. David fooled him by stomping down hard on his pedals and skying his heavy.

He sailed up and *over* the helpless *Talon*, slicing into it with his lasers the whole way. David feathered his jump jets, rotating the *'Hopper* in mid-air. He came down behind the light machine, landing in a crouch.

The *Talon* pilot swiveled at the waist, tearing into David's *Grasshopper* with the two ChrisComp 39 Medium Lasers attached to his machine's left arm actuator.

David pushed through the crimson rain of laser fire and gave the light 'Mech a healthy push.

Thirty-five tons of BattleMech rolled down the hill, crushing its Lord's Light PPC in the progress. It came to rest forty meters down the hill, face up.

David hit his jump jets and brought his machine down just a few meters from where the *Talon* lay. And at last, David could see what was written on the 'Mech's waist: "The Silly Little Clowns of Death."

And suddenly David understood the weird paint job, the pale blue "pants," the chalk-white "face," the red rubber ball "nose."

Pitgar was trying to make a fool of him.

Here he had faced a scout lance of light 'Mechs who had more speed and maneuverability than he did, and at least as much firepower, and all people would remember was the lumbering giant who had beaten up on The Silly Little Clowns of Death.

It occurred to David that a lot of his fights had this same ridiculous quality. He remembered the big, splashy destruction of The Dam and his battle against the brawlers and even the spectacle of the Grand Melee. Hell, *all* of his fights were this way. Why hadn't he seen it before?

He remembered the press conference after the incident at The Dam. A reporter had called him The Songbird, because he flew like an angel and when Pitgar gave him the right music he could sing.

David had forgotten the comment because it had been the same day that the Maskirovka had kidnapped Marcy and he'd been worried sick about her, but now he saw it was part of a pattern, Michael Pitgar's pattern. Freak Show got tremendous ratings and all it cost was David's credibility.

David gritted his teeth, suddenly furious.

It was at that moment the *Spector* attacked.

David's *Grasshopper* had been motionless for several long minutes while he contemplated the cratered wreckage of his career as a fighter. Perhaps the *Spector* pilot believed he was heat-locked or had some kind of mobility problem.

Whatever the reason, the light 'Mech had snuck up behind him *again*. David's first warning that the enemy machine was there was the shrill warble that accompanied enemy target lock.

David acted on pure instinct, stomping down on his pedals and launching his *Grasshopper* into the sky on golden pillars of plasma. His wireframe schematic flickered from green to yellow as the *Spector*'s Nightwind laser bit into his legs, but then he was up and out of the light machine's line of fire.

David feathered his jump jets, pivoting in mid-air.

Bringing his lasers to bear.

The *Spector* backpedaled furiously, trying to keep David's *'Hopper* in front of him. Somehow the light 'Mech's pilot managed not to trip, despite the fact that he was moving up a gentle incline *backwards* with a deadly heavy careening towards him.

That had to be Adlet.

The thought just made David angrier. They could've met on the battlefield as two proud warriors, engaged in a contest of honor and skill instead of this, this *farce*.

David roared, the echo of his fury transmitted to the world by his comms system as he sliced into the *Spector* with a line of emerald fire, melting armor from the light 'Mech's bulbous head.

He landed off balance, putting a hand down to keep himself from falling, and then he was up again, charging right into a storm of the crimson light as the *Spector* desperately tried to save itself. David watched his wireframe flicker and change as the light 'Mech burned away his armor.

He didn't care.

He dropped his reticle over the *Spector*'s form and fired a flight of LRMs even though the other machine was well within his firing arc. The *Spector* staggered under the hammer blow of the missiles' kinetic energy.

And David hit him again, rapidly closing the distance.

The *Spector* stumbled and almost fell.

David cut into the little 'Mech with his suite of lasers.

The dull buzz of the heat alarm sounded from far away, and David slapped the override without even thinking. Without even considering. The temperature spiked in his cockpit, burning his lungs and his eyes, but David didn't even feel it.

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It was nothing compared to the heat coming from inside him, the blazing pyre of white-hot rage.

He held his shot.

And the *Spector* staggered backwards.

Adlet's movements were jerky, uncertain. The other MechWarrior was showing signs of panic.

A feral smile touched David's lips. *Good.*

He surged forward, desperate to get at Adlet and make him pay for all the damage, all the humiliation. Sixty meters. Fifty. Forty.

The *Spector* braced itself, lashed out with crimson lines of death. David pushed right through them. Thirty. Twenty. Ten.

And then Adlet jumped, hitting his own jump jets in a desperate bid to escape.

It was a fatal mistake.

David's left hand darted out and caught the light 'Mech around its right ankle. His claw crushed the ankle, smashing through armor and mangling the metal beneath. David gritted his teeth against the searing heat as he took the plasma wash across the front of his *Grasshopper.*

For a second the *Spector*'s heptet of HildCo jump jets tried to lift 105 tons of BattleMech off the ground.

Then they lost their hopeless battle with gravity.

David jerked his arm down, bringing the *Spector* down in a smooth arc that intersected the earth. There was a horrible crash as the ground trembled with the force of the *Spector*'s death.

It was an incredible sequence of events, a fight sure to make the highlight clips, but it was not enough for David.

He pounced, crushing the light 'Mech's legs, tearing the *Spector*'s weapons free from its arm actuators. Then he tilted his head back and roared again, pouring all of his rage and hatred and pain into that horrible inhuman sound.

Let them call him Songbird now.

To be continued…