

LION'S ROAR

Part Three

Steven Mohan, Jr.

**Studio A, The Harbor
Equatus, Solaris VII
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
17 May 3064**

David did not shower, did not change, did not *slow down* after getting out of his very badly damaged *Grasshopper*. He only paused long enough to bite out a terse, "Where's Pitgar?"

Someone called out, "The studio."

"Great," muttered David, "He's probably already making calls to the networks."

He stalked down a narrow, concrete corridor, turned left through a pair of oak double doors, and emerged in a beautiful hallway decorated with mahogany paneling and a crimson carpet. He turned right and stepped into The Harbor's studio complex.

He glanced through an open door and saw Pitgar leaning casually against a podium talking to someone, no doubt setting up the press conference. *Damn*. The fight was barely over and already Pitgar was hustling publicity. In thirty minutes, maybe forty-five, the studio would be full of obnoxious reporters shouting questions about the Songbird.

Pitgar.

David gritted his teeth. He couldn't believe he'd trusted him at the hospital. *Damn him*.

He stalked toward the open door. Fury took David. "*Pitgar,*" he bellowed. "*Just what the hell do you think you're doing?*"

Pitgar turned towards him, goggle-eyed. *Good*. No one talked to Michael Pitgar that way. Well, he was going to hear it now, by God.

"You sleazy son of a bitch," David snarled, stepping into the studio, eyes locked on the other man's face. "You've destroyed my career."

Pitgar said nothing, which was quite unusual for him. The promoter always had something to say.

It was at this point that David noticed the horrible hush that filled the studio, the awful silence that invariably presaged some horrible disaster.

And then it was broken by the insectile clicking of dozens of shutters going off all at once.

David slowly turned to his right, only to see the room was filled with reporters.

I guess it doesn't take him thirty minutes to set up a press conference, after all, David thought dully.

"David," said Pitgar smoothly, "I did *not* ruin your career. If you'd been paying attention, you would've seen that I have made you the most famous MechWarrior on Solaris."

David's hands clenched at his sides. If he'd been armed, he might've killed Pitgar right there and then. "*Sure,*" said David hotly. "By shredding by reputation, my *dignity*. By sending me to fight brawlers and battle *clowns*."

Pitgar shrugged. "Who cares how I did it, as long as I attracted the appropriate attention." He gestured at the audience of reporters.

Digital flash units exploded all around him. Well, if the whole planet was going to see this, he might as well make this good. "You didn't do it to *help* my career. You arranged your exhibitions to make me look like a fool. So no serious stable would ever take me on. You trapped me in your Freak Show, Michael. You are a liar and a fraud."

David could tell by the way Michael's lips tightened that that last shot had hit home. Michael Pitgar was the consummate showman, and the last thing he liked being called was a fraud.

Especially in front of the press.

Pitgar's eyes narrowed. "You shouldn't blame me for the clowns, David."

"Oh, and who should I blame?"

Pitgar flashed him the smile of a fat cat that had just eaten a very fat bird. "You might want to discuss it with your lover Marcy Kessel. The clowns were *her* idea."

"I-I don't believe you," David stammered.

Pitgar turned to the press and shrugged palms up as if to say, "What am I to do?"

And then David he turned and stalked out of the studio, his moment of weakness and indecision broadcast to all the world by the jackals of the press.

One more humiliation to sit atop the rest.



The first tinge of panic stirred in David when he went to Marcy's borrowed office and found her gone. His fear spiked when one of the Freak Show PR flacks told him Marcy had left with an older Asian gentleman.

Xu.

David's mouth tasted dry. *How could I let this happen again?*

He clenched his fists and turned in a circle, unsure of where to even begin.

One of the PR women leaned towards him, extended a hand clutching a cell phone. "Call for you, Mr. Singh."

"Who is it?" he snapped.

The woman frowned. "It's Ms. Kessel."

David snatched the phone out of her hand. She scowled and stalked away, but he'd already forgotten about her. "Marcy, are you there?"

"David. We need to talk." Her voice sounded flat. *Scared.*

"Are you OK?"

"Listen, I just—" Someone snatched the phone away and a new voice came on the line.

"You are trying my patience, David."

"*Xu,*" David whispered. Suddenly his mouth tasted very, very dry.

"Can we make this easy, David? Or will you insist on doing something heroic and stupid that will get a number of people killed, including, but not limited to, you and Ms. Kessel?"

"Easy," David whispered. His heart hammered painfully in his chest.

“Well, let’s hope you really mean it, David. I must tell you, you are rapidly running out of last chances.”

David said nothing, not trusting himself to speak.

“Very well, we’ll do this one last time. Come to Ms. Kessel’s lovely hotel room. Alone and unarmed, please.”

“OK,” said David, but the line was already dead and he was talking to a dial tone.

***Equatus Arms, Horsehead
Equatus, Solaris VII
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
17 May 3064***

They took him as soon as he entered the lobby.

Two thugs in sunglasses and expensive suits bracketed him as soon as he passed through the hotel's double door. "No thanks fellas, I think I can find my own way," said David.

One of the men chuckled. "Don't think so, friend. This way."

They led him to a door that opened on a set of concrete stairs.

One grabbed his arm, guiding him up the stairs, while the second followed with his needler out.

"I hope you don't want a tip," said David, "because, frankly, I think the service sucks."

"Shut up," said the man who had his left arm. He said it easily, without rancor. Those two words chilled David. This man was a professional, just doing a job. Nothing personal. There was no lever to move this man, no chance of an opening.

Which meant he and Marcy were already as good as dead.

David expected to leave the stairwell on the Fourth Floor (he and Marcy were in 416) but they went up another two floors before the thugs guided him out of the stairway and to the suite at the end of the hall (620.)

"Open the door," said the man behind him.

David did as he was told.

He stepped into a generic five-star suite, brown leather sectional, bar in the corner, sliding glass door leading to a balcony that no doubt looked out over the pool. A closed door separated the living room-kitchen area from the bedroom.

There was a woman in the room, red hair, short, wearing a black leather jacket with a suspicious bulge near her waist.

"Strip naked," said the man behind him.

"I—" David began.

But the woman cut him off with a snort. "It's OK," she said sardonically, "we're big fans."

David scowled. What mattered was Marcy, not a little humiliation. He'd risked a lot more than nudity coming here. So he pulled off his shirt, kicked out of his shoes.

"Keep going," said the woman evenly.

David took a deep breath, pulled off his pants, and stepped out of his underwear.

She took a long, frank look and raised an intrigued eyebrow. "So that's what it takes to be a big-time fighter."

"OK," said the man behind him, "he's clean."

The woman pouted. "But we were having so much fun."

"Anna," one of the men barked.

She sighed and tossed David a pair of jeans, a white shirt, and a new pair of underwear.

"Hope those are big enough," said the woman, her eyes flickering from the briefs to his naked body. "I didn't have any idea how much, ah, room you needed."

"It's fine," said David through clenched teeth. He quickly got dressed. When he was finished, he turned to the woman. "All right, I've played your little game. Are you going to take me down to Marcy's suite?"

"Through there," said the man behind him, waving his needler at the door to the bedroom.

David pressed his lips together in a thin line, but he didn't have many options. He walked to the door and opened it.

Marcy sat on the bed, dressed in the same navy capris and sky blue polo shirt she'd been wearing before his fight. Her back was straight, but her eyes were locked on the floor. She did not look up when he opened the door.

David's heart ached. *What have they done to her?*

Xu Longshen was there, too, of course, sprawled out in a plush green hotel chair, right hand curled around his pistol. There was

no point in rushing him. David had already been treated to a demonstration of Xu's marksmanship, and even if he did somehow overpower the Mask agent there was no doubt the three thugs in the other room would finish him off.

"And here we are, my young friend. You gave me a merry chase, but at last we are at an end."

The words sent a jolt of terror shooting down David's spine. *End?*

"Nothing has to be over," said David and hated himself for the little tremor of fear that slipped into his voice.

Marcy still hadn't looked up. David clenched his hands into fists. *What have they done to her.*

Xu smiled broadly. "Oh, it *is* over. And the truth is you never had a chance."

"No, Xu," said David, "you're wrong." Somehow he couldn't keep the desperation out of his voice. "Nothing's changed. You can't kill me without embarrassing the Confederation, and you've proven you can get to Marcy no matter what I do." He turned his hands palm up in a shrug. "Stalemate."

Xu laughed, a long, deep laugh that came from deep in his gut. It did not sound like the laugh of a man who had been stalemated. He nodded at the holo-vision sitting in the room. "You know we caught you little performance at the press conference. Very poised, very savvy."

David licked his lips.

"I believe you have a question for Marcy?"

David turned and looked at her. She still hadn't moved. Doubt stabbed through his gut.

No, David. Xu's playing you. Using your insecurities against you. Don't give in. "Tell him, Marcy," David said in a strong voice and suddenly he was *sure*. More sure of anything than he'd ever been in his life. "Tell him you didn't sabotage my career. Tell him that Michael Pitgar is a liar."

Marcy *still* didn't look up, but he heard everything he needed to in her voice. He choked on a sob. "*I can't.*"

His jaw dropped. "*What?*"

She looked up her face twisted into an expression of anguish.

And then she broke into a joyous laugh. "Oh, you poor young fool."

David shook his head. "But they hurt you."

"My wounds were no worse than any soldier of the Confederation might be expected to bear," Marcy said proudly.

David put his hands to his face. *This can't be happening.* "Xu dumped you in that alley."

Xu raised an eyebrow. "Did I? There was a Mask agent hidden the back of the alley the whole time."

David remembered the sensation of being watched. *No! No, this could not be true.* He met Marcy's steady gaze. "But... but they raped you."

"Oh. *That.*" She gave a dismissive snort. "No offense, David, but I like a little variety."

David's breath caught. For a moment time seemed to lock down. And then he shook his head. "No. No, I don't believe you. You told me—"

"Told you what?" asked Marcy sharply. Her face crumpled into a mask of despair. "Oh, David they're making me do this. Please help me." Then she looked at Xu and they both laughed. "Something like that?"

David felt the chill of ice creeping through his guts. It was a cold as cold as death. And suddenly David understood what it would've been like if that long-ago shell had bounced left instead of right.

And suddenly he understood that he wasn't a survivor, after all.

"You're Maskirovka," he whispered.

Marcy smiled brightly. "Got it in one try."

David shook his head, looked at Xu. "How can you work for *him*?"

Xu smiled. "You've got it all wrong, my young friend. It is I who work for *her*."

David nodded slowly. "I think I see it all now," he said in a low, steady voice. All the emotion had been wrung out of him. "Xu

was originally assigned to keep tabs on me, probably along with a whole list of other defectors. But then I had the close match with the *Atlas*, and all the sudden I was a celebrity. He thought I might use my newfound fame to embarrass the Capellan state. So he tried to have me killed."

"And bungled the job," said Marcy coldly, looking straight at Xu.

Xu said nothing. It was as if he had turned to stone. He didn't even blink.

"So now you had a problem. The very notoriety that made me dangerous to you made it impossible for you to kill me. Especially since your first plot was exposed."

"We *had* to do something," said Marcy.

"So you sent me into fight after ridiculous fight and you distracted me so I wouldn't notice. Gave me a woman to protect, to worry about, to *love*."

His voice cracked on the last word, and for a second David thought he saw something like shame in Marcy's eyes.

Or was it one more trick?

"Perhaps you are not quite as stupid as we originally thought," said Marcy

"Was Pitgar in on it?" David asked.

"Pitgar didn't know I was Maskirovka," said Marcy, "but he was happy to make you look like a fool."

And suddenly he had the sick realization that Xu *had* actually told him the truth at the hospital. What had he said? *Pitgar is dangerous. And you should not trust this woman, Marcy Kessel, they will lead you down a dangerous path.* If only he'd listened.

"Because now there's not a single reputable stable on the planet that would have me," said David bitterly.

"Well," said Xu, "there *is* one."

David closed his eyes. "Let me guess."

"We are prepared to offer you a spot in Tandrek Stables," said Xu. "You'd have to switch to a Capellan 'Mech design, of course. But you'd be a headliner." He paused. "A champion."

"And all for the glory of the Celestial Throne," said David.

"And all for the glory of the Celestial Throne," Marcy agreed.

"Never," David whispered. He opened his eyes. "*NEVER*," he roared.

Marcy nodded. "Well, that's not entirely unexpected. Fine. Here are your options, David. Fight for us. Or keep fighting for Pitgar. I'm sure he'd take you back. Or third, retire. One warning, however. If you pick option two or three, your notoriety will surely fade."

"And then you'll be able to kill me," said David.

She shrugged. "I bear you no ill will, David." She glanced at Xu. "But then your victories were not *my* defeats."

The older man sat perfectly still, saying absolutely nothing, and suddenly David understood how badly the other man wanted to end his life.

She shrugged again. "Win or lose, love or die. Who can say for sure what will happen? It is a big and strange universe." She flashed him a tight smile. "But it does bear thinking about."

He looked from Marcy to Xu and back again. "And so now you're going to let me go, just like that."

Marcy flashed him a lopsided smile. "Why not? You'll be back."

David shook his head. "No."

"Of course you will," she said. "You have nowhere else to go."

***New John Carter Tower, Black Hills
Solaris City, Solaris VII
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
23 May 3064***

Of course, in the end, there was only one place he could go.

Michael Pitgar leaned across his desk, a grin spread across his fat face, his shrewd eyes crinkling merrily. "So Marcy Kessel was a Maskirovka agent. Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant."

David clenched his jaw. A second later he forced himself to relax. "And you never knew," said David coldly.

At that, Pitgar *did* laugh. "Allow a competitor to steal my best fighter from right beneath my nose? David I thought you understood me better than that."

And the truth was David did. Ruthless self-interest was Pitgar's guiding star. As long as David stayed on the right side of that motivation, he could trust Pitgar.

After a fashion.

"You did sabotage my career."

Pitgar shrugged. "A businessman protects his assets. I couldn't have you go running off to Gemini or Lynch now, could I?"

"It was a dirty trick," David snarled.

"Yes, it was," said Pitgar thoughtfully. "But you yourself put the finishing touches on my little gambit when you burst into my press conference and melted down." The fat man shook his head. "No major stable on Solaris would take you now."

Pain stabbed through David's jaw, and he realized he was clenching again. He didn't trust himself to speak.

Pitgar stared at him across the desk, hands folded, face placid. Expectant.

He's waiting for me to ask.

Somehow he couldn't do it.

After a minute, Pitgar's lips quirked into a sad smile. "Look, I know this is hard for you. Come and fight for Freak Show again. When I've put away enough capital, I'm planning to take the company legit, make it a real Solaran stable. And you will be my champion. Until then..." Pitgar shrugged with his hands, "we'll make plenty of money together."

Pitgar offered a sympathetic frown, but David saw something else in those cold, gray eyes. Something mean. Pitgar was daring him to believe the lie one more time.

There would never be a legitimate stable and David knew it. Worse, Pitgar *knew* David knew it.

But there was nothing else for him to do.

"All right," said David in a hoarse voice.

Pitgar flashed a smug smile. Both men knew he owned David's soul.

And he'd purchased it cheap.

David rose stiffly from his chair.

Pitgar's gaze followed him up. "On Solaris Seven anything can be bought and sold. But you only had one thing to trade: your skill as a warrior. That's why this all happened to you, David. Because in the end that one thing wasn't enough. I just wanted you to know, because, well, I like you, David."

I like you, David.

The horrible thing was in some twisted way, David really thought he did.

Grayland Gardens Arena
Grayland Gardens, Solaris VII
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
2 June 3064

David stalked his 'Hopper through the familiar wreckage of Grayland Gardens, wondering what Pitgar had cooked up for him today. No doubt the scenario would take all of his considerable skill to survive and somehow rob him of his dignity at the same time.

Lovely.

He carefully checked his MAD gear, his thermal sensors, his visuals.

Nothing.

He moved down the access road toward the former resort's Olympic-sized pool. The pool was a rectangular prism of brackish water set in a wide expanse of flagstone and surrounded by heavy forest. If he could set-up poolside, he would gain maneuverability while his opponents would have to blunder through the trees to get to him.

If someone else hadn't thought of it first.

David approached the pool slowly, eyes glued to his sensors, index finger caressing his main trigger.

Fifty meters out he hit his jump jets and hopped forward and *up*, gaining just enough height to clear the tree line. He looked down and saw the massive expanse of flagstone was clear and cut his jets so that he'd drop inside the perimeter of the pool area. He landed in a crouch and almost fell as his *Grasshopper's* seventy tons pulverized the flagstone into dust. Somehow he kept his feet.

He stood his 'Hopper up. He'd taken a small risk, but he'd bought a nice defensive position. This way he'd be ready for whatever Pitgar threw—

The thought was interrupted by the sudden warble of an alarm. A trail of smoke streaked across the plaza. The missile hit low, blasting armor off his right knee.

Where the hell did that come from?

Had to be from an arc three four zero to zero two zero relative, but how had—

A second missile hit him from his right.

Multiple attackers?

A third explosion hit his left thigh.

This time he didn't think, he just wheeled and fired down the SRMs contrail.

And then he was moving, pounding across the flagstone, leaving 'Mech-sized footprints in the rock facing. His eyes flicked down to his rear monitor to see if he'd hit anything, and for the first time he really *saw* the last missile's contrail.

A line of smoke originating from the tree line barely two meters off the deck and slashing up at him in a shallow angle of ascent. No way a 'Mech fired that shot.

Infantry.

No, it couldn't be. That was too monstrous even for Pitgar.

And then he caught movement in his rear monitor. His eyes flickered down. For an instant he picked out a shape in amongst the trees.

That second was enough.

David flashed on a blocky soldier enmeshed in camouflage power armor, his face hidden behind a black bubble facemask set in a narrow helmet, a laser rifle cradled in his arms. The infantryman was wearing G12 Tornado Power Armor (Light).

Now how the hell had Pitgar pulled *that* off?

Suddenly it all made sense: his failure to detect the enemy, the multiple threat vectors, the low angles of attack. He was facing a squad of power armor. (No way Pitgar could've gotten a hold of *eight* suits of power armor.) Since Tornados didn't possess integral weapons, that meant the SRMs had to have been staged beforehand, and their strategy was hit and run.

Before he could hit back.

No infantry squad, even one equipped with power armor, could hope to bring down David's heavy. No they had to be here to soften him up.

Hit and run.

David clenched his jaw. They would just see about *that*.

A ruby beam of light flashed out of the forest, burning into the armor over his left shin.

He ignored it and pivoted away from the hidden soldier who had fired that shot, looking for the one he'd *seen*. He trusted his instincts and dropped his reticle over the heavy forest then jerked it ten meters to the right.

Then he let loose with his lasers, pouring a line of emerald fire into the heavy forest. The underbrush caught fire at once, followed by the angry *pop* of trees exploding as the water in their trunks suddenly flashed to steam.

Confronted with a wall of fire, the soldier in Tornado armor suddenly darted into the pool area and raced along the pool's edge.

Not fast enough.

David pulled his reticle over the infantryman and then dropped his shot, pouring the killing power of his medium laser into the pool's edge a meter from the soldier's feet. The monochromatic light flashed water into steam and gouged a deep divot out of the pool's side.

The soldier tumbled into the water and sunk beneath the surface with a soft *plop*.

Tornado armor might've been designated as Power Armor (*Light*), but there was no question of the soldier swimming.

David jerked his 'Mech forward, stepping into the pool and crouching down. Grayland Gardens had been out of business long enough that a thick scum of algae floated on the water's surface, hiding the fallen soldier.

Fortunately the man's approximate position was marked by the scar in the pool's side.

A second laser hit David in the back. He ignored it, reaching down with a hand to clear the muck away.

Good enough to see a dark shadow on the pool's bottom.

David scooped the soldier up and placed him gently on the deck.

He glanced down and saw the rustle of ferns behind him, alerting him to motion. David moved right, sloshing his *Grasshopper* through the water as ruby spear of light flashed by him, missing him by less than a meter.

He hit his jump jets and golden plasma flashed the water into a curtain of steam. His *'Hopper* executed a perfect little hop, coming out of the gray cloud and giving him a clear shot at the treeline. He saw motion and dropped his reticle over the fleeting shape, reached for his primary trigger and the large laser it controlled—

He jerked his hand back.

If he took that shot, he'd kill the soldier in the Tornado armor. No way could the infantryman hope to take a point blank shot from a large laser and hope to survive.

That was murder.

And suddenly David understood. To win this match he was going to have defeat the power armor squad, and there was no way to do that without killing them.

He shook his head. No. He would not kill these men. Not for a *game*.

Michael Pitgar had claimed that there was nothing David could trade on but his skill as a warrior, but he had been wrong. David had one more asset.

His integrity.

He reached down and selected the referee channel. "This is David Singh. I surrender." And then he turned off his comms system, cutting off the shouts of an enraged Michael Pitgar.

Media Center, Grayland Gardens Arena
Grayland Gardens, Solaris VII
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
2 June 3064

The hardest thing David had ever done in a life full of doing hard things was step up to the podium to face the Solaris fight press. Michael Pitgar was already there, stuttering through an explanation of why his champion had just thrown in the towel only eighteen minutes into the fight, when David stepped into the room. There were some uncomfortable questions about Pitgar's ties to organized crime.

And then he saw David enter the room and a nasty smile flashed across his face. "The truth is, ladies and gentlemen, I don't understand what happened any more than you do." He turned on David. "Perhaps Mr. Singh can explain it to us," he snarled.

If he expected David to shrink from the challenge, he was going to be disappointed.

David stepped up to the podium. For a second it looked like Pitgar wasn't going to give way after all, but David flashed him a smoldering look. A look that said, *I have faced down the warriors of House Hiritsu and the treachery of the Maskirovka, I have lived with death and defeat and humiliation and there is nothing you can do to stop me from having my say.*

Some of that must've gotten through to Pitgar, because he stepped quickly aside.

David held his gaze for a lingering moment, just to make sure they understood each other, and then he turned to face the press.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he said in a deep, steady voice, "my name is David Singh. The name 'Singh' means lion, and I hope you will agree that name fits. As you all know, lions are fierce and noble creatures."

He flashed them a sheepish smile. "Unfortunately, lions are not very smart."

That earned him a good-natured laugh from the crowd.

He bowed his head, gathering his will. Then he looked up. "Ladies and gentlemen, over the last five months, I've been manipulated

by a greedy promoter and a Maskirovka agent. They maneuvered me into fights that made me look ridiculous.”

Now there was dead silence in the room.

“I don’t really think—” started Pitgar.

“*You will be silent,*” Singh roared.

Pitgar’s jaws clacked shut and he took another step back.

Singh turned back to the press, drew in a deep breath. “I tell you these things merely to set the record straight. Not to make any excuses. It was my career, my responsibility. I knew what Michael Pitgar was when I signed with him.” He looked down. “And perhaps a smarter man would’ve seen through the Maskirovka plot.”

He drew a deep, shaky breath. “I have come here to announce that I will no longer fight for Freak Show Entertainment, and since I have no doubt that no reputable stable will touch me, this effectively ends my career.

“The fight fans of Solaris and the Inner Sphere have seen me at my best and my worst. I hope you will remember me as I was during my fight with the *Atlas*, a warrior doing what he loved more than anything else in the universe. Of my time with Freak Show, I hope you will remember this last fight where I refused to purchase victory at the cost of other men’s lives.

“And that’s all I have to say.” He looked up and his vision blurred. “Good-bye.” His voice cracked on the last word and he stepped away from the podium, feeling for the first time in his life that he had been really and truly beaten.

***The Cockpit, Montenegro
Solaris City, Solaris VII
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
14 June 3064***

Before he had walked away from fighting, he used to love sitting at The Cockpit's bar, resting his hands on the long run of laminated oak, sipping a nice German beer while he drank in the smell of cedar smoke and traded friendly insults with whichever bartender happened to be on duty.

But that had been before.

Now all he wanted to do was to slide into a booth and wrap the bar's darkness around him like a cloak.

And he no longer spent the night nursing a single beer.

David tossed back the shot of vodka and gasped at the burn. Then he poured himself another drink with a shaking hand. He was getting sloshed, and why the hell not? There were no more simulations to run through, no more maintenance routines to check on, no need to keep his body in fighting trim, so what the hell?

It had been only a couple weeks since his press conference at Grayland Gardens, but already the whole life of MechWarrior seemed like it had happened to someone else, as divorced from his reality as the life of Ramesh da Silva.

He choked down another shot.

"So it's really true," said a cold, calculating voice. "You *have* retired."

David glanced up. Caught sight of a short gentlemen in his late fifties wearing a dark blue pinstripe that cost a thousand C-Bills if it cost a dime.

David frowned. "Mister, unless you're an overdressed waiter with a complimentary bottle of vodka hidden up your sleeve, you'd better go."

The man slid into the booth across from David. He was bald, with just a shadow of white hair circling the side of his head. "You don't know who I am?"

"Turns out that it's a good thing, since I don't *want* to know."

"You made some nice money fighting for Freak Show." The man shrugged. "Why not take it and retire to a nice life somewhere in the Alliance or the Fed Suns?"

David snorted. "A *nice life*." He reached forward, poured some more vodka into his glass, raised it to his lips.

"Why turn yourself into a drunk? It'll cost you your life." The man's eyes glittered like two obsidian chips in the semi-darkness. "But then maybe that's what you want."

David slammed the glass down on the table with a loud *clack*. "Look, my life is *already* over. I am a fighter. *That's all*."

"And now that life is closed to you," said the man softly.

"Yes," David hissed.

"Because...?" asked the man, drawing the word out.

"Because," said David bitterly, "every major stable on the planet has learned that I can't be trusted."

Surprisingly the man smiled. And the calculation in his expression disappeared, replaced by... joy. "Now, that's where you're wrong."

"I think you'd better go," growled David.

The man extended his hand across the table. "I am Nigel Daelun, principal owner of Blackstar. I'd like you to come fight for us."

David stared at the hand like it was a cobra.

"Look," he said slowly. "I've been through this once or twice before. So where's the Maskirovka agent. Under the table? Outside? Ready to jump out from behind a bush and say *boo*?"

The man's proffered hand closed into a fist and the smile faded away. "I am a loyal citizen of the Federated Suns, Mr. Singh," he said in a voice that had suddenly grown arctic cold. "I assure you that there are no Mask agents in my employ."

"Then why? Why would a major stable want me?"

The man pursed his lips. "The actions of Michael Searcy and Drew Hasek-Davion badly tarnished Blackstar's reputation. I need fighters with talent, but even more importantly, we need fighters with integrity. And I think you might just have both."

"Oh, you do, do you?" said David reaching for another glass.

The man grabbed David's wrist. "Yes. I do. The whole world saw you break off an attack to rescue a downed soldier, even though you were still under fire. And there's no doubt you're a brilliant fighter, Mr. Singh. You took everything Pitgar and the Mask threw at you and came back for more."

"And besides, with my current troubles you could get me cheap."

"Exactly," said the man.

"Still, it's a hell of a risk," said David.

"One I'm willing to take."

"I meant for me," said David. "Lately I've been having a little trouble trusting people." He wrestled his wrist out of the man's grasp and downed his drink. "I'm sure you understand."

The man sat still perfectly for a moment and then slid a sheaf of papers toward David. "Take a look and let me know."

David chuckled. "Sure, right."

And just like that man disappeared. The rest of the night was a blur. So much so that David woke up the next morning on the floor of his apartment with a headache, a dry mouth, and a crumpled mass of papers clutched in his right hand.

He sat up and smoothed out the papers, and was startled to discover that the night before hadn't been a dream after all.

***The Factory, Montenegro
Solaris City, Solaris VII
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
10 August 3064***

The first day of the Grand Tournament. His *first* Grand Tournament. Butterflies danced and wheeled in David's stomach, but he didn't mind. In fact, he wanted to remember the feeling forever.

David maneuvered his *Grasshopper*—with its new copper and black paint job— through the broken wreckage of The Factory floor, his senses singing with tension. He carefully stepped his 'Mech around piles of rubble: twisted I-beams, mangled shuttle parts, ferrocrete dust from collapsed walls. The arena's large, ceiling-mounted lights were coated with metal dust, making The Factory a dimly lit warren of shadow and confusion.

And Evelyn Czerny was in here somewhere.

Not that he'd ever find her here on her home turf. The scraps of steel messed with his sensors, throwing off his MAD gear and reflecting radar beams until his console became an incomprehensible mess of static. And there was more. The debris took away his one edge—his agility. He didn't dare jump, not without having some idea of what he was going to come down on.

As if fighting Evelyn Czerny in her ninety-five ton ALB-3U *Albatross* wasn't bad enough.

There was no possible way he could win.

David smiled.

Which meant that was exactly what he was going to do.

He saw a gaping hole in the deck, a 'Mech-sized hole where random laser fire had weakened the floor enough that it eventually gave way under the weight of an unfortunate fighter and his machine. David's mouth tasted dry. Maybe setting up on the second floor hadn't been the best idea.

On the other hand, if he could lure Czerny up here, it might give him an advantage. His *Grasshopper* with its jump jets would likely survive a fall. Her *Albatross* would not.

He edged carefully past the hole. He had a bad moment when the floor seemed to shift beneath his feet, but he didn't go down and then he was past the hole.

His close call was enough to focus his attention on the deck, which is how he saw a mark in the dust and stopped.

He glanced down, dialing the magnification up. *Footprint*. Just about the right size for an *Albatross*. So. Czerny had come this way.

But she wasn't here now.

Where'd she go?

The Factory was a dilapidated shuttle manufacturing plant that was slowly falling apart. It was really two structures, not one, each building a cavernous, two-story ferrocrete block. Right now David was stalking through the second floor of the east building. He snapped on an external light and found what he was looking for: a gigantic freight elevator at the end of the aisle way. Big enough to accommodate a 'Mech.

Even an assault machine.

So Czerny had come this way and then had left via the elevator. *How long ago?*

And then he felt the rumble of something massive moving through the building. It rattled the structure's frame and vibrated up through the feet of David's 'Mech until he felt her passage in his bones.

Czerny.

But how close?

He closed his eyes and concentrated.

Close. And... below.

David suddenly had an inspiration. He stalked back to the hole in the deck.

In time to see Czerny's *Albatross* pass below.

The great machine was painted orange and gray, the colors of Bromley Stables. The ninety-five ton assault 'Mech was all sharp angles and weapons, the triangular cockpit armor resembling a bird's beak.

And it was moving away from him.

David dropped his reticle over the giant's back and laid into Czerny with both lasers, emerald fire scouring her weak rear armor. She started to turn, trying to present her undamaged forward armor to the threat, but David moved with her, shifting his feet, trying to maintain his balance while he held the shot.

It was a race and one he couldn't possibly win. She was standing on solid ground while he was trying to keep his footing at the edge of a hole and her turn radius was much tighter than his.

She came around.

Just as the heat alarm whistled shrilly in his ear.

David hit the override just as Czerny struck back.

And in that instant he saw just why she was so highly rated. Instead of lashing out at him with her Sunbeam Large Laser or her Oriente LB 10-X autocannon, she smashed two flights of Irian Weapons SRMs into the ceiling just behind David's position.

And suddenly David was falling.

He stepped down on his foot pedals, trading plasma for velocity, desperately trying to regain his balance.

Somehow he came down on his feet.

The impact of the landing struck him like a blow, smashing his jaws together, jerking him forward, the straps of his five-point restraint biting into his flesh. David rode the blow out and just as it passed and he found that he was still standing, Czerny punched into him with her LB 10-X, the big gun's massive hammer blows carving up his armor and threatening to unbalance him all over again.

She walked the line of shells expertly across his torso and just like that his armor flickered from green to yellow.

The *Albatross* extended its right arm and unleashed a hell of crimson darts that only missed because David staggered under the force of the Czerny's autocannon. She was tearing him apart and there was nothing he could do.

Except.

David stalked forward, *into* the lethal stream of heavy metal. Glanced up once.

Then he went vertical.

David Singh had always been a brilliant MechWarrior, but in the air he was an artist of breathtaking skill. Somehow, without taking a second to think about it, he hit his pedals with exactly the right force and pushed his *'Hopper* forward at precisely the right angle to launch himself into a perfect parabolic arc, one that carried him up through the hole he'd fallen through, with just enough momentum to take him past the edge of the hole, but not so much that he smashed into the building.

David came down hard again, hard enough that he felt the 'Mech's right knee lock up. And that wasn't all he felt. The building shook with the movement of the monster below him.

Czerny was on the move.

His radio crackled, and he heard her voice over the fighter-only channel. "You are a good MechWarrior, Singh, but it is time to end this."

"I agree," answered David, "and I accept your surrender."

She laughed, a warm, hearty sound. "Very well, we'll do this the hard way." And in the background, underneath her voice, David heard a light buzz. Like the alert sound that signaled a freight elevator was opening its doors.

She was coming for him.

David cast about for a strategy. He could try to run, but the damaged knee would cut his speed and the *Albatross* was capable of 65 kph. Besides, even if he did manage to open up any distance on Czerny, she'd just carve him up with her LRMs and her extended range large laser.

His prospects weren't much better if he chose to hang around and fight.

His armor schematic was a checkerboard of reds and yellows, and a steady red light burned where his medium laser was supposed to be.

That left him nothing but his large laser to engage a massive machine at medium range.

Damn it. If only she hadn't brought him down with those two flights of short range missiles.

His external mikes picked up the *whirr* of the elevator rising in its shaft.

He backstepped his *Grasshopper* behind a pile of metal shards that once had been a half-built shuttle, using it as an impromptu revetment.

It didn't look good for David. This time he wasn't up against Shamil Idrisov. Evelyn Czerny was one of the best fighters on Solaris. She had the upper hand, and she wasn't going to fall for any of the usual tricks.

But...

A lot of things still could happen.

The revetment might hold up to the pounding the *Albatross* could dish out, at least long enough for David to strike and fade back. Or maybe he could go with his original plan and lure Czerny towards the hole. Let's see how well she'd fall without the benefit of jump jets.

But whatever happened, he was facing the best Solaris had to offer in a duel free of subterfuge or artifice. He had traveled a twisted and dangerous path to get here, but at last he was doing the one thing in the world he was meant to.

And who could ask for any more than that?

The elevator dinged and the light above the door flashed from white to green. The alarm buzzed, signaling that the doors were about to open.

David braced himself, ready for whatever would come next.