

BATTLECORPS

**WAY OF
THE CHAMPION**

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Live Fire Range Charlie
Fort McKittrick, Paris
Draconis Combine, Star League
16 June 2725

A hard rain hammered the *Orion*, beating out an angry tattoo on the 'Mech's canopy. Beneath the rain's fierce rattle Lieutenant Aleksandr Kerensky made out the shriek of a savage wind. He watched bushes shake as if caught in the jaws of some great beast. Trees *swayed*.

A jagged shard of lightning slashed through slate clouds, flooding the valley with incandescent white fire.

Followed closely by the deep, rolling *boom* of thunder.

Aleksandr wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his arm. *That one was close*. One hundred meters, perhaps. No more.

Too close.

Aleksandr had deployed his lance in a long line abreast at the valley's mouth, one hundred meters north of the line that separated the forest from high mountain prairie. Perhaps not the best place to be in the middle of a thunderstorm.

But his orders left him few options

The rift valley was a gash in the earth's flank, a deep wound inflicted by time and the movement of continents, a force so powerful that the land itself finally buckled and gave way. The fractured landscape provided hundreds of vantage points for a 'Mech to snipe at the communications tower Blue Lance was ordered to defend.

All this Aleksandr had known.

What he hadn't known was what could not be learned from a map. That the valley floor was blanketed with a thick forest that made it impossible to spot Red Lance creeping toward the objective. Or that a massive thunderstorm would roll in from the east, clouding his MAD gear and dropping visibility to a paltry hundred meters. His first line command and he was about to be defeated by a *storm*.

Well, a storm and Paula Nilssen

It was Paula who staged scores of bright phosphorous flares throughout the forest, bleeding off heat and making it nearly impossible to track Red Lance on IR. The tactic might be imaginative and effective, but it was also impractical in a real raid. That made it a stunt.

Vintage Paula.

Aleksandr ran a hand through thinning blond hair.

Very well. If he could no longer use his sensors, he would use his brain.

Paula's Red Lance was the aggressor. So it didn't matter if he could see her or not.

She would have to come to him.

He called up a schematic of the exercise area. The flimsy steel framework that was supposed to be the comms tower stood on a high bluff that commanded a view of the rift valley below. The good news was that it was 130 meters up and unapproachable. The bad news was it didn't have to be approached to be destroyed. A skilled pilot could hit it from range.

And Paula was a crack shot.

The northern approach to the tower was bad: spires of fractured rock, narrow draw canyons, high mesas fashioned from crumbling sandstone. But the advantages of the southern approach more than made up for it. Even without the storm it was an untenable defensive position.

Someone in the 564th Hussars wanted Aleksandr to lose. He allowed a grim smile to touch his lips. His marks at the Nagelring Military Academy and his natural talent as a MechWarrior had earned him an appointment to the Gunslinger Program. And success could breed resentment.

A lesson he'd learned the hard way at Tharkad University.

Well, if there was no conventional way to win the exercise he would just have to try the unconventional

"Blue Lance, this is Blue One, over."

Sergeants Ng, Helter, and Jakobi all answered up at once. All three noncoms piloted slim, swift *Phoenix Hawks*.

The Hussar's First Battalion, Bravo Company followed the Star League practice of rounding out a company's TOE with a single 'Mech type, which meant that Red Lance would also field a trio of *Hawks*. As Gunslingers, only Aleksandr and Paula had the privilege of selecting their own 'Mechs.

"Blue Two," said Aleksandr, addressing Thanh Ng, "you will assume command of the lance and move down the east wall of the valley. Proceed six hundred meters into the forest and then hook back. You will engage Red Lance from the rear."

"You want us to abandon the objective?" asked Ng, not bothering to hide his doubt.

"Da."

"And where will you be during all this?" Helter asked, puzzlement in her clear voice.

"I will draw them out."

"And just how will you do that?" asked Jakobi.

"Victory is achieved at the moment the warrior understands his opponent's true nature."

Ng snorted. "Who said that? Sun Tzu?"

Aleksandr allowed himself a small smile. "*Nyet*, Sergeant Ng. I said it. Execute your orders, please."

Aleksandr heard an exasperated sigh over the channel. "It's your funeral," Ng muttered. And then to the lance, "You heard the lieutenant. Move out."

Aleksandr said nothing. He was unsurprised at the insubordinate comment. Ng had graduated from West Point the same year Aleksandr had left the Nagelring. Traditionally MechWarriors joined the SLDF as sergeants. Aleksandr owed his green bars to the Gunslinger Program. But dueling was an individual sport. So while he outranked Ng, the sergeant had more actual leadership experience.

Not surprising that there would be some resentment. Trust in a commander was not issued along with a uniform. It had to be earned.

With luck he would earn a little piece of it today.

For a moment Aleksandr watched the *Hawks* move left and disappear into the forest. Then he made his own way south, shouldering aside trees with his blocky 'Mech.

The forest glistened in the rain. The underbrush glowed with the beauty of fine jade, ferns flashed electric green as he stormed past. Aleksandr imagined he could almost smell the sharp, clean odor of the rain.

He pushed past a dark fir tree. For an instant it groaned with the weight of his passage, then it gave way, falling with a loud crash.

No doubt Paula would hear him coming, but there was nothing to be done for it. Besides he wanted her to know where he was.

Crack.

Aleksandr used the sharp snap of the near lightning strike to cover the sound of a shuffle to the right. He didn't want her to know *exactly* where he was.

Then he took another step forward.

Just as a line of green light sliced through the forest not five meters to his left. Right where he'd been standing a second before.

Aleksandr thought for a second and then he reached forward, stabbed a button on his console. "You missed, Paula. I thought you were marksman."

Another shot flashed through the forest, this one twenty meters to the left. She was firing blindly. Aleksandr smiled to himself. Sometimes a taunt could cause an undisciplined opponent to overcommit.

Another lesson he'd learned on Tharkad.

She was piloting a *Rifleman*, a superior 'Mech for hitting from long range, but his *Orion* ought to have the advantage here in the forest.

A peal of thunder rolled through the trees and Aleksandr used it to cover his movement forward and to the right. If he could just circle around . . .

He heard the distant whine of lasers and wondered if the rest of his lance had stumbled across the red forces. His tactical situation had improved dramatically. As long as he stayed in the forest it was as hard for Paula to see him as it was for him to see her.

A clever commander hearing him blundering through the trees would have moved the other way, trying to reach a point where she had a clear shot at the tower. But Paula could never bear to bypass an opponent.

To her everything was a duel.

He wasn't really worried about the *Phoenix Hawks*. The mediums were designed for flanking attacks and scouting missions. Their maneuverability advantage was obviated by the forest and the storm. And the *Hawks* weren't really built for sniping. A talented pilot might be able to take out the tower with the 'Mech's large laser, but Aleksandr doubted any of the troops in Red Lance could manage it.

As long as he kept Paula occupied the tower was safe.

He thought he saw motion — the intricate dance of tree branches. Probably just the wind, but still . . .

He glanced down at his thermal sensors. The glowing screen was dotted with seven or eight emerald points of light—Paula's decoy flares. This close he should be able to tell the difference between flares and a 'Mech's heat signature, especially if the 'Mech were—

Moving.

There. At one seven five. A sudden flash of light.

Aleksandr charged forward, ready to end this fight *now*.

He burst into a clearing, raised the medium laser built into his left arm and sighted in on a—

Flare.

It burned sun-bright in the center of the clearing, a point of white light so sharp that it made his eyes water, despite the protective filtering of his canopy.

The flare was bolted into a spidery stand built of welded rebar, positioned at just the right height to mimic a 'Mech's fusion reactor. She must've ignited it remotely.

It was a lure.

Suddenly Aleksandr was moving.

Autocannon fire tore into his chest, abrading armor. Aleksandr staggered under the twin hammer blows as his onboard computer introduced an instability in the *Orion's* control system to simulate the attack's effect. Emerald beams stabbed into his chest and his armor schematic flashed from green to yellow.

Where was she?

He fired blindly into the forest.

He heard Paula over his radio, her voice breaking up, but the static unable to cover her smug satisfaction: "Who's missing now?"

His chest armor flashed red.

Aleksandr tried to turn, to present her with undamaged armor, but somehow she moved with him, even though her turn radius was much greater than his. It was a magnificent exhibition in shooting.

He gritted his teeth. Only seconds left before she cut into something vital.

Aleksandr staggered out of the clearing and won a brief respite.

He keyed his comms channel. "Blue Two, Blue One. Report status."

Ng's voice came back. "Red Lance is down. I say again, Red Lance is down."

"Need assist, Blue Two. Engaging one Hotel Mike, grid one eight niner, over."

"On our way," said Ng crisply.

"That won't save you, Kerensky," said Paula. Green fire splashed across his chest. Somehow she'd managed to work her way around.

Aleksandr tried to step left, to get clear, but it was already too late. His *Orion* shuddered and then went down, *hard*.

He shook his head, trying to clear it. Pain lanced through his skull. He glanced at his board. The computer had simulated a gyroscope casualty.

The ground shook with the weight of an approaching 'Mech. Aleksandr looked up and saw Paula looming over him in her *Rifleman*.

The heavy 'Mech was a pair of thick legs topped by a blocky torso. What really made the *Rifleman* distinctive was the twin barrels that extended from each shoulder actuator. Where each arm should have been the 'Mech sported a large laser and a deadly autocannon, perfect for hitting from long range.

Aleksandr's radio crackled and joyous laughter rolled over him. "Nice try, Kerensky."

"You have not beaten me yet, Paula."

"Oh no?" He heard the mirth in her voice.

And why not? Aleksandr lay flat on his back, under the guns of Paula's *Rifleman*. He tried to raise himself, but the computer was apparently simulating some weakness in his left arm because he crashed back to the ground.

Paula laughed harder.

Aleksandr gritted his teeth and brought his knee up, aimed a savage kick at Paula's left ankle.

She stumbled backwards, her laughter replaced by a violent curse. She lost her balance and dropped to her right knee.

Aleksandr tried to rise, using his right arm this time. Stopped when he realized Paula's right arm mount was pointed right at his cockpit.

"Not very sporting, Aleksandr Sergeyovich," she snarled.

"This is war," said Aleksandr. "There is no reason to be sporting."

"Yes," said Paula. "Remember that."

Aleksandr's world flashed emerald green.

His canopy polarization was easily able to diffuse the laser. Their weapons had been set at a fraction of rated striking power for the exercise.

Still, it was a kill shot.

His machine locked up as it simulated his death.

He blinked away the bright after-images of Paula's last shot. He felt the tremor of a 'Mech's passage, undoubtedly Paula moving off to take out the tower. When he opened his eyes he expected to see nothing.

Instead he saw a beautiful sight: a trio of *Phoenix Hawks* pouring laser fire into the *Rifleman's* vulnerable rear armor. Paula struggled to climb to her feet, to get clear of the attack, but the damaged ankle joint was giving her trouble and she was facing too many enemies.

After a long moment her *Rifleman* toppled to the ground.

The cheers of the Blue Lance *Hawks* filled the exercise channel. Aleksandr couldn't help but smile.

A new voice broke in. "This is Exercise Referee. Red One has suffered armor melt-through. Congratulations, Lieutenant Nilssen, you just went nova. Exercise is awarded to Blue Lance. All right, ladies and gentlemen, let's head in for debrief."

The *Rifleman* used its guns to lever itself to its feet. Paula stalked off without another word.

Aleksandr looked up and saw his *Phoenix Hawks* standing around him. As he watched the one marked One Bravo Dash Nine (Sergeant Ng) slowly raised its right arm and tapped the massive laser clutched in its right hand against its head.

A salute.

Then all three of the *Hawks* turned and stalked away.

Aleksandr hoped Paula had gained something from the exercise.

He knew he had.

BattleMech Housing and Repair Facility
Fort McKittrick, Paris
Draconis Combine, Star League
16 June 2725

Aleksandr stood outside the women's locker room, arms folded, back against the cold brick wall, head down.

Furious.

The door opened and Paula emerged in a cloud of steam. Like Aleksandr she wore her dress uniform: brown leather boots over olive drab pants and a matching half-jacket. The only difference between his uniform and hers was the red school rag that slashed across her chest indicating she'd graduated from the War Academy of Mars. She carried her service cap tucked under one arm, revealing the shoulder-length honey blond hair she hadn't bothered to put up.

Aleksandr couldn't help but notice that the ends of her hair were still damp from the shower. The steam carried with it the delicate smell of her perfume, a light note of violets.

He came to attention. "Lieutenant Nilssen—" he said stiffly.

"Aleksandr Sergeevovich," she said with genuine delight. "You waited for me." She flashed him a crooked smile. "You're not sweet on me, are you?"

Aleksandr's mouth suddenly tasted dry. He managed a stern look. "I came to speak of a serious matter."

She tightened her face into a parody of his grim expression. "By all means, then."

Aleksandr sighed. This was not working. Better to try the truth. "Paula, I am concerned for you."

She raised a single blond eyebrow. "This *is* serious."

"The war game today—"

She flashed the crooked smile again. "Looking for a few pointers."

For a second he just gaped at her, open-mouthed. "A few *pointers*? But you *lost*."

Paula snorted. “Lost? Correct me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t that you lying flat on your back in that dusty old *Orion*?”

“*Nyet*. I mean *da*, but—”

“Then how did I lose?”

Aleksandr shook his head. “The exercise was awarded to Blue Lance.”

“Yes, but I beat the best MechWarrior at McKittrick.” Her lips quirked. “Other than me, that is.”

“Paula, this is just what I’m talking about. You understand nothing. Do you think the Star League put you here for your own personal glory?”

Her smile froze on her face. “So I understand nothing?” she said coldly. “Just because I am not the brilliant Aleksandr Kerensky, Socrates of the Star League.”

“Paula, I did not mean—”

She stabbed a finger at him. “Listen to me well, my little philosopher. There is one reason and one reason alone for my presence here. *I am a champion.*”

“*Da*,” Aleksandr snapped. “But think carefully on that word’s meaning. To some it means glory and adulation and holovision commercials. But once it meant something different. There was a time when warriors championed ideals. What ideal do you stand for Paula Nilssen.”

She flashed him a feral smile. “Victory.”

And then she swept off, leaving Aleksandr to watch her retreating back.

564th Hussars Regimental Command
Fort McKittrick, Paris
Draconis Combine, Star League
17 June 2725

Aleksandr hesitated before the door, his fist frozen a centimeter from the frosted glass. He understood how it would look. Craven. Disloyal. Self-serving. Once he touched his fist to that glass he would set in place a chain of events that would lead to his isolation. His fellow soldiers would hate him and how could he blame them? There was a part of him that hated what he was about to do.

Still.

He was an officer of the Star League. He had a duty to something bigger than himself.

Somehow he found the courage to rap on the glass.

A gruff voice said, "Enter."

An English word pronounced perfectly but with a touch of a German accent. The greeting was clipped and precise. That single word told him much about the man behind the door.

Aleksandr pushed the door open, came to attention, snapped off a stiff salute.

The officer behind the desk returned the gesture without rising, a puzzled frown stretched across his face. "Kerensky is it? What can I do for you?"

Aleksandr's regimental commander, Colonel Hermann Scheer, was a tall, spare man in his late thirties. His brown hair was just starting to gray, but there was no sign of age or infirmity in his alert brown eyes.

"Sir." Aleksandr drew a deep breath. "I have a concern."

Scheer steepled long fingers over the paperwork spread over his desk, sat back in his black leather chair.

Aleksandr swallowed. "Regarding Lieutenant Nilsson."

Scheer's lips tightened almost imperceptibly, but he said, "Speak."

"Sir, I do not believe she understands the nature of her duty."

Aleksandr felt the weight of the man's dark gaze on him, sizing him up, measuring his character. Finding it lacking. "That is a serious charge, Lieutenant."

"She is only concerned with the winning of duels."

"That is because she is a graduate of the Gunslinger Program," said Scheer dryly. "Perhaps you've heard of it."

"Sir, she thinks nothing of the wider ramifications of her actions. It is not enough to win duels. 'War is nothing more than the continuation of politics by—'"

"*Ja, ja,*" said Scheer, waving his words away. "Do not think you can win my favor by simply quoting Prussian strategists."

"Excuse me, Colonel, but—"

"*Enough,*" Scheer snarled and Aleksandr lapsed into shocked silence.

"I am sorry if your ego was bruised by the tower exercise, but Nilssen is the better MechWarrior."

Of course, Aleksandr thought. It was you who set me up to fail. He did not say the words, but he must have let them show on his face, because Scheer's eyes narrowed.

Right then he knew he'd lost this exchange.

Still.

Aleksandr took a step forward. "*Da,* she is a better MechWarrior than I, but I would think the tower exercise proves—"

"The tower exercise was an opportunity for both of you to gain some tactical leadership experience, experience you will both need *if—*" (and that word sounded particularly ominous to Aleksandr) "*—your careers are to continue beyond this assignment. But it has nothing to do with being a Gunslinger. Please do not confuse the two.*"

"But the context of the *ronin* duels indicates—"

"Let me tell you what the context indicates to me, *Lieutenant*. If the *ronin* continue to defeat our best warriors duel after duel the people of the Combine will lose respect for us. The very future of the Star League is at stake here. What we need is victory."

“What we need,” said Aleksandr firmly, “is victory with honor.”

Scheer stared at Aleksandr for a long moment, his face a hard and unreadable mask. Finally he said, “You are a bright and talented young man, Kerensky. But if you are to have a future in the SLDF you need to learn that you don’t know everyth—”

Scheer’s words were cut off by the rapid blare of a klaxon.

“*Perimeter alarm*,” Kerensky shouted over the din.

Scheer was already around the desk. He pushed out the door and took off down the hallway at a dead run, Kerensky close behind.

The Colonel turned left at a corner, then right, and pushed into a double set of doors marked “COMMAND CENTER.” Inside the darkened room were banks of screens and four independent hottables, all of them showing exactly the same thing.

A single *Thug* painted white, a red disk centered on its chest, sixteen crimson rays radiating outwards, filling Aleksandr’s vision.

* * *

For ten long minutes the assault ‘Mech stood perfectly motionless, not responding to hails on any of the common Combine channels. Aleksandr watched the still, silent image of the *Thug* as Scheer shifted to ever more exotic frequencies, as Paula speculated that the Combine ‘Mech might have a comms problem.

The five practice ranges SLDF forces used to hone their skills were officially part of the base, but they were separated from Combine territory by nothing more than three-meter chain-link topped by concertina wire.

The *Thug* had appeared at the north gate of the fortress proper.

The terrain to the north was broken and fragmented, a difficult place to maneuver, a terrible place to fight. There was a reason SLDF troopers called it the badlands.

Aleksandr saw a small flicker of motion away from the *Thug* and something heavy and unpleasant settled in his stomach.

The command center was Fort McKittrick’s primary C³ asset. This was the place regimental command would use to coordinate

the base's defenses, should it ever come to that. A giant screen, five meters by twelve dominated the far wall. It was flanked on each side by four smaller screens. Long rows of consoles faced the screens, each post manned by a mid-grade officer or a senior noncom. The Command Center Watch Officer oversaw everything from a raised dais set behind the consoles.

Aleksandr stepped over to the master sergeant at the Surveillance and Communications Board and bent over. "Excuse me, Master Sergeant, would you cycle your screen through the camera feeds, please?"

The noncom leaned forward and touched a button.

Fort McKittrick's designers had clustered 37 cameras around the north gate. Some were atop mesas, some were embedded in the fortress walls, some were embedded in rock walls.

Aleksandr stopped the noncom after eight. He'd seen all he needed to see.

People were gathering.

They peeked out of crevices, clustered behind rocks, peered down from the tops of cliffs. The MechWarrior in the *Thug* wasn't having comms problems. He was a showman, readying the Parisians for what was to come.

A contest between the Draconis Combine and the Star League.

The *Thug* pilot wouldn't contact them over a radio circuit. He wanted an audience.

Kerensky turned to the watch officer and pointed at one of the wall-mounted speakers. His voice sliced through the rising babble in the command center. "*Sir*. I recommend you feed the north gate microphones to this speaker."

For an instant the room fell silent.

The officer, a captain, glanced at Colonel Scheer. The senior officer's lips tightened, but he put down the microphone in his right hand. "Do as he says."

For a minute or two nothing emerged from the speakers but the light whisper of the wind and the hiss of static. Then a voice boomed out, amplified by the *Thug's* external speakers.

"My name is Mary Quinn and I am *ronin*."

There was a pause.

“Should we answer?” Paula asked, looking at Scheer.

Aleksandr studied the S & C console.

“We must be careful,” said Scheer, “if we don’t—”

Aleksandr bent a microphone on a goose neck to his lips and pressed a yellow button. “This is Lieutenant Aleksandr Sergejevovich Kerensky. I serve the Star League. Whom do you serve?” He released the button.

Paula looked stricken. “What the hell do you think—”

“*Silence,*” snapped Scheer. “What is the meaning of this, Lieutenant?”

“It is important question,” said Aleksandr. “The *ronin* claim to fight for the Combine and yet Urizen Kurita denies any connection to them. Thus he’s able to challenge Star League without taking political responsibility. But if one of his *ronin* were to slip, to acknowledge his master...”

Scheer thought for a moment, nodded slowly.

Just as Quinn began to speak. “Perhaps you are not well-versed in the complex and beautiful language of Japanese, Kerensky. The word ‘*ronin*’ refers to a warrior without a master. I am servant to none but the spirit of *Bushido*, an ideal that had proven its elegance and utility a thousand years before the unholy birth of your Star League. I have come to challenge you, if I can find a warrior within your walls worthy to stand before me.” The tone of her voice left no doubt as to what she thought of *that* idea.

Aleksandr leaned forward, but Scheer grabbed his arm. “*Enough.* Lieutenant Nilssen speaks for this post. *She* is our champion.”

Aleksandr shook his head. “Colonel, she cannot challenge a *Thug*. Not in her *Rifleman*. She gives up twenty tons and—”

“You are under the mistaken impression this is a debate, *ja?*” asked Scheer, his voice icy.

Aleksandr’s mouth snapped shut.

Scheer nodded at Paula. She nodded back, stepped toward Aleksandr and the microphone, reached for the yellow button.

Her hand was trembling.

Aleksandr clenched his jaw. Scheer could deride his debating skills if he wished, but what he didn't understand was that this challenge and reply was another kind of battle.

One that Paula was ill-equipped to fight.

She depressed the button. "This is Lieutenant Paula Nilsson of the Star League. I promise you a good fight, *ronin*, if you are truly ready."

She was answered by booming laughter. "Where is this Aleksandr Kerensky? Have I frightened him away with mere words?"

Aleksandr held himself at rigid attention, not trusting himself to speak.

Paula's cheeks colored. "I am Fort McKittrick's champion."

She stood so close to Aleksandr he could smell her: sweat and soap and a touch of violets. Did she even understand how fragile she was?

If only he could tell her—

"Very well, Lieutenant Paula Nilsson. We shall see what kind of warrior you are. I await you here."

"*Nyet*," Aleksandr snapped. If the duel was fought over the broken land near the north gate the terrain would obviate the *Rifleman's* single advantage, its long-range hitting power. "You can't—"

"You will be silent," snapped Scheer, "or I will have you removed from the room. Do you understand me, *Lieutenant?*"

Aleksandr swallowed hard. Suddenly everyone in the room was looking at him.

"*Da*, Colonel."

"Why do you hesitate, Paula Nilssen?" asked Quinn. "Do you also tremble before my words?"

Paula looked at the screen and down at then down at the board, thinking. Surely she must understand, Aleksandr thought. *Please understand.*

Paula touched the yellow button. "I will meet you before the west gate in thirty minutes."

Aleksandr felt a sinking feeling deep in his guts. West gate was a good tactical choice—lots of open prairie where a *Rifleman* could work, but there was nothing in Paula's artless presentation that would force Quinn to accept the change in venue.

Quinn whooped in disbelief. "The *west* gate? In thirty minutes? Is that how long it will take you to get your nerve up? Perhaps we should meet at the south gate in an hour. Or on Luthien in a year. Or perhaps you would prefer never to duel me. I am *here*, warrior, *now*. Come to me if you dare."

Aleksandr winced. With those words the battle was already half-lost.

Paula at last found the wit to see that she'd been beaten. To her credit, she did not flinch from her duty. She pressed the button. "I will be there, *ronin*."

She squared her shoulders and stalked from the room.

All of the soldiers in the command center watched her go, but Aleksandr was sure only he realized she went to her death.

* * *

Every MechWarrior and command grade officer posted to Fort McKittrick crowded into the command center to watch the duel. As the regiment's other Gunslinger, Aleksandr had a spot right up front.

He studied the monstrous image of the *Thug*. The cockpit looked like a brutish face, set low in the 'Mech's torso, below the lines of its powerful shoulders. The assault 'Mech was built for nasty business and Aleksandr had no doubt that was just what they were going to see.

The speakers carried the whine of hydraulics as the north gate swung open and Paula's *Rifleman* stepped into the picture. It was painted a bright Kelly green, the color of summer grass after a rain. It was the color of the Nilssen family stretching back to ancient Denmark. Painted on the torso just below the blocky cockpit was the Cameron Star, an eight-pointed device whose right point was noticeably longer than the rest.

The *Thug* bowed. "Die well, Paula Nilssen," said Quinn over her loudspeakers.

Paula hesitated, obviously uncertain how to respond. When she finally thought to bow in return the *Thug* was already moving off, its massive back to her. Aleksandr knew Paula was just out of her element, but to the watching Combine citizens the exchange would look like a display of Star League discourtesy.

The *Thug* stepped off the ferrocrete road that led away from the north gate. Quinn piloted her 'Mech between a low mesa and a steep cliff. Even a massive assault machine could quickly lose itself in this broken hell.

Quinn was going to make Paula come to her.

The *Rifleman* followed, carefully leaning right to peer down between the mesa and the rock wall. Paula's every move looked tentative and fearful, as if she were *trying* to make the Combine case.

Even if she somehow won this match, it would be no better than a draw in the minds of the people who mattered most.

And Aleksandr was the only one who could see it.

The *Rifleman* moved down the path the *Thug* had taken.

"Switching cameras," intoned the watch officer.

The screen jumped and now they were seeing a front view of Paula's green *Rifleman* moving down the path.

Sergeant Ng stepped up to Aleksandr, lines of worry etched into his face. He was a short, slim man, face pale brown, large almond eyes framed by a shock of raven hair that was long on top and cropped short on the sides and back. He bowed his head slightly, whispered, "Does she have a chance?"

Aleksandr saw how badly Ng needed him to say yes. And Aleksandr wanted to say it, wanted to *believe* it. He looked at Ng. The man was holding his breath. *He loves her*, Aleksandr realized. And suddenly he understood something else: part of a leader's job was to offer hope.

But it couldn't be a false hope. That way lay a trap. Troops would forgive a commander many things, even being their own deaths, but they would never forgive a lie.

It was a measure of the trust Aleksandr had gained during the tower exercise that Ng would ask him the question at all. He wasn't going to throw that trust away now.

He glanced at the screen again, saw the tactical reality there he knew he'd see. Turned back to Ng, met his eyes.

And slowly shook his head.

Ng sucked in a startled breath. Stabbed a look at the screen, looked back to him.

Aleksandr offered him a sad smile and turned away.

On the screen the *Riflemen* was half-way down the narrow defile.

Just as the *Thug* popped out the other side.

There was just time for the *Riflemen* to take a startled step backwards, then SRMs rippled across the Star League 'Mech's cockpit, fragmenting armor. The missiles were followed immediately by a jolt of violet lightning from one of the *Thug's* two Tiegart Particle Projection Cannons.

Paula just stood there and took the full blow of the assault, too startled to hit back and unable to duck in the narrow passage.

Then the *Thug* shifted away from the opening. Waiting for its heat load to dissipate.

Even across five clicks, Aleksandr could read Paula's mind. Surely every MechWarrior could. Did she surge forward into the arms of a assault machine that would crush her at close quarters or step backwards into another trap? As Aleksandr watched she made the worst possible decision.

She did nothing.

For ten long, painful seconds (Aleksandr felt each one as a throb in his temple) she did nothing, just stood there, locked up.

"Do something, damn it," Ng whispered fiercely.

After a moment, the *Rifleman* took a backwards step.

Just as the *Thug* popped out again.

This time Paula hit it, melting the armor around its big, ugly face with her lasers, followed by a long, stuttering blast from her twin autocannons. It was a testament to her skill as a marksman that even as rattled as she had to be, all her shots were spot on perfect.

The *Thug* just stood there and took it. And why not? It had more than double her armor.

When she cycled from lasers to autocannon, the *Thug* raised its arms and hit back with both PPCs, violet flame slugging Paula's right laser barrel.

The *Rifleman* staggered backwards.

And out of the defile.

In an absolutely beautiful move, Paula threw her weight over and pivoted on her machine's right foot, swinging out of the *Thug's* line of fire. Her *Rifleman* ended up standing next to the opening, its back to the rock wall.

A howl of rage went up over Quinn's loudspeakers. The *ronin* charged into the defile after her prey.

Paula turned again, ducked across the opening just far enough to line up her left arm. In a stunning display of shooting she smashed the *Thug's* left knee with her autocannon, pouring a long line of depleted uranium slugs into the joint, abrading armor and then she was *out*, ducking back behind cover, just as violet flame splashed across the rock lip of the passage.

Aleksandr took a step toward the screen, his heart in his throat, suddenly daring to hope. Paula had no hope of beating Quinn in a stand-up fight, but if she could take out the knee, knock the heavier 'Mech down, maybe . . .

Paula stepped back, ducked under another flight of SRMs, stabbed left with an emerald beam from her laser. Armor ran like water, melting away from the *Thug's* knee. Aleksandr saw the silver gleam of the ferro-titanium kneecap underneath, a bundle of myomer scorched black.

Almost there . . .

Paula shifted her stance to move right before the monster's heat sinks allowed it to bring its PPCs back into the fight. She put all her weight on the left ankle —

(the ankle Aleksandr had smashed the day before)

ready to push off—

—and her left ankle just *gave*. Suddenly she was tumbling backwards, falling.

And the *Thug* was on her like some massive predator, hunched over the fallen *Rifleman*, both arms raised, pouring PPC fire into Paula's cockpit until it burned everything down to carbon.

For a long moment silence seized the Star League command center as if the *Thug's* furious assault had murdered the very idea of sound.

Along with Paula Nilssen.

Then Colonel Scheer turned his dark gaze on Aleksandr. "Congratulations, Kerensky," he said in an arctic voice. "Does it feel good to be right?"

"Sir, I never—"

"You must be happy to have gained what you've always wanted. You are now this regiment's champion." And with that he turned and stalked out of the room.

Suddenly all eyes were on Aleksandr. He felt the weight of their hard gazes. And right at that moment he knew he was the only person in the universe they hated more than Mary Quinn.

Outside the North Gate
Fort McKittrick, Paris
Draconis Combine, Star League
18 June 2725

Aleksandr stood on the exact spot where the *Rifleman* had fallen, looking down at the rocks fractured by the giant's fall, the sheen of oil against sandstone, the glint of stray bolts and spacers and brackets that was all that remained of Paula's 'Mech since the Star League engineers came and hauled it away.

Smelled the mix of charcoal and burnt myomer that he knew would always be his last memory of her.

Aleksandr drew in a deep, shuddery breath, hoping for a trace of violets.

Finding only the smell of death.

He closed his eyes.

"Is it possible?" said a bitter voice behind him. "Does the great Kerensky feel guilt?"

For a moment Aleksandr flashed on the ankle of Paula's *Rifleman*, damaged by his angry kick and he did feel guilt. He turned, faced the man behind him. "Thanh," he said softly.

"I will thank you to refer to me as Sergeant Ng," he snarled.

Aleksandr nodded slowly. "Very well. But if you insist on that title I expect you to meet the obligations that go with it."

"Oh, there's no problem there, *Lieutenant*."

Aleksandr shook his head. "The courtesy due an officer is the last thing I am talking about."

"Really? Well, *good*. Then let me tell you this, *sir*." Ng strode forward, jabbing an angry finger in Aleksandr's face. "She needed your *help*. And all she got from you was scorn and derision."

"I tried to help her," said Aleksandr softly. "She would not have my help."

"You made her doubt herself when—"

Aleksandr cut him off. "No one could make Paula doubt herself. *That was the problem.*"

"You *bastard.*"

"You say these things because you are angry and hurt. Because it is easy to dislike me because I am different. And because I was right when you didn't want me to be."

Ng bared his teeth. "All you wanted was glory for yourself."

"*Nyet,*" Aleksandr snapped. He stepped forward, fists clenched, breathing hard. It took all his will not to strike Ng. "*This* is obligation I speak of, *Sergeant.* All of us who wear the Cameron Star have an obligation. It is an obligation to *civilization* and it outweighs any feelings we have for each other."

"*You unfeeling son of a bitch,*" Ng whispered.

"*Nyet,*" said Aleksandr. "I am not 'unfeeling.' I feel much, but for the grand sweep of history. Think, Thanh, all the lords of the Inner Sphere, they hate the Camerons, but they do nothing. Why? Because the people love the Star League. These duels, they are assault on the Star League, an attempt to defame it in the eyes of the Combine's people. *What if it works?* What if the Star League falls? Humanity will descend into an age of barbarism. *Millions* will die."

Ng glanced away, looking at the spot where the *Rifleman* had fallen. "I would give it all up," he said, his voice hoarse, "if I could get her back."

"Then you are failure as a Star League warrior," said Aleksandr coldly. He turned and strode away, feeling the steel coiled around his soul, hard and unyielding and yet pulsing like some living thing. There was one thing he would not admit to Ng, until now had not admitted even to himself.

He had loved Paula, too.

564th Hussars Regimental Command
Fort McKittrick, Paris
Draconis Combine, Star League
25 June 2725

It was a week before the perimeter alarm sounded again, before Aleksandr stalked into the command center and saw the *Thug* plastered all over the center's screens. As he strode into the room, he saw Colonel Scheer leaning over a microphone.

"Stop, Colonel," Aleksandr barked.

Scheer wheeled around, mouth wide, face flushed with fury. "How *dare* you."

"How? I shall tell you. *I* am champion. Only champion speaks for Fort McKittrick. Did you not say that before?"

"You are way out of line, *Lieutenant*."

"*This*," roared Aleksandr pointing at the room, "is battlefield. This is where Paula Nilsson died, *in this room*. If you will not allow me to fight here, then I will resign and leave it to you, Colonel, to face the *ronin* yourself."

Scheer stiffened at that, dark eyes blazing, his breathing an angry rasp in the suddenly silent room.

It was time for the Colonel to face the judgment of Fort McKittrick's officers as Aleksandr had, to answer the question they all silently asked.

Would he give in or would he face death himself?

Finally Scheer leaned forward and said, "I will not save you from yourself this time, Kerensky."

Aleksandr jerked his head down. "Agreed, Colonel." He strode toward the S & C console and adjusted the microphone.

"*Konnichiwa, ronin*. I am Lieutenant Aleksandr Sergeyovich Kerensky of the Star League and I speak for this base."

A hearty laugh filled the room. "Kerensky? The same *warrior* who fled at the sound of my words."

"I commend you on your words, Mary Quinn," Aleksandr an-

swered. "I only hope to find that a Combine citizen's honor is built on something more substantial."

Quinn spat out a Japanese curse. "Come to me, Kerensky, and you will discover what a Combine *warrior's* honor is made of."

The watch officer glanced at Kerensky. "She's at the south gate."

Aleksandr nodded. Of course. The south gate. She must know that he piloted an *Orion*. The south gate was heavily wooded and a river ran through it, perfect for dissipating the immense heat load her *Thug's* twin PPCs would generate.

Worse still, the trees would take away his missiles, leaving him only with his autocannon and two medium lasers. Quinn was again seeking a fight on uneven ground.

Aleksandr leaned into the microphone. "I will fight you at the north gate."

The rocky terrain of the north gate would force an even fight between the two assault machines.

"Once again the cowardly Star League seeks to reserve a special advantage to itself," said Quinn scornfully, accusing him of the very trick she was trying to play.

"I recognize that you stand for nothing, are loyal to nothing," said Aleksandr coldly, "but it is not so with me. I stand for the Star League and I am loyal to the memory of my friend. I will stand in the spot where you stole her life. If you fear honor, then do not come. It matters not to me."

The *Thug* on the wall screens seemed to stand up a little straighter as if it had just taken a blow to the solar plexus. "*I will destroy you just as I destroyed your friend.*"

"We shall see," said Aleksandr placidly, "*if you have the courage to fight.*"

"Very well," Quinn snarled. "The north gate. I shall join you there in an hour." And then she stalked away.

For a moment there was absolute silence in the room, and then, hidden somewhere in the back someone began to clap. The applause slowly rippled through the room until it grew into a powerful crescendo. Officers shouted and pounded Aleksandr on the back as he walked out of the room. Aleksandr understood that

they still didn't like him, but they recognized something, something important.

He had just won the first round.

Outside the North Gate
Fort McKittrick, Paris
Draconis Combine, Star League
25 June 2725

Sunlight glinted off Aleksandr's *Orion* as he stepped out of the north gate. He had never worried much about his 'Mech's paint job before, always choosing something practical. Up until the night of Paula's defeat, his *Orion* had been painted in the irregular olives and browns and blacks of alpine camouflage.

Now it was painted a lovely, new Kelly green.

For Paula.

The *Thug* bowed to him.

Aleksandr immediately bowed back. "I am Lieutenant Aleksandr Sergeyovich Kerensky and I serve the Star League." His deep voice echoed among the rocks where once again the People of Paris had gathered. He saw a flicker of motion. There was a holocamera up there. So the whole world would watch.

Good.

"I am the *ronin* Mary Quinn," she answered, "and I serve the spirit of *Bushido*."

"Then we have no quarrel," said Aleksandr, "for there is room within the Star League for the honorable code of *Bushido*."

"You may not speak for the spirit of *Bushido*," Quinn snarled. "Only *I* may do that."

"Only you?" Aleksandr asked. "So you place yourself above the Coordinator?"

Quinn howled with rage and fired both her PPCs.

But Aleksandr was ready for her fury, he was already shifting right. The violet beams of death missed left and spent themselves against the fortress wall.

Aleksandr hit back with a flight of SRMs and a long gout of fire from his Autocannon/10, all while on the move.

Running for cover.

Quinn took the missiles across her lower torso, the warheads scouring away the heart of her rising sun, but she deftly ducked under the stream of heavy metal, suffering some damage to her left shoulder, but nothing more.

Then, *somehow*, she managed to hit back.

Violet fire sliced into the light armor of Aleksandr's *Orion* just as he stepped behind a mesa.

Heat spiked in his cockpit, scorching his lungs, flash-drying the sweat off his body.

Damn.

Aleksandr had never seen a 'Mech *move* like that. Scheer had been quite correct when he'd said Paula was a better MechWarrior than Aleksandr, but neither was in the same league as Quinn.

And right then he knew he was going to die.

Aleksandr closed his eyes and offered a quick prayer to St. Nikolai. If he were to die he would make his death count for something.

By using the most powerful weapon at his disposal.

Aleksandr moved left, keeping his back to the stone wall, praying for time.

"Is not the Coordinator the ultimate embodiment of *Bushido*?" Aleksandr asked.

"Hai."

Quinn's voice echoed among the rock walls, making it impossible for him to tell where she was. Hopefully she had the same problem.

The mesa—and Aleksandr's cover—ended, but there was a ridge of rock a hundred meters to the east.

A hundred meters.

Five point six seconds at a dead run.

"Then why do you not serve the Coordinator, *ronin*?" Aleksandr asked, contempt heavy in his voice. "Is it because you are secretly opposed to *Bushido*?"

He darted across the open space.

“Or maybe you’re just not good enough.”

She screamed and a PPC cut into his left leg. Aleksandr staggered under her assault, but somehow managed to make it to the cover of the sandstone wall.

She’d been waiting for him.

Quinn fought with all the grace and fury of a jungle cat. Aleksandr had always been a gifted MechWarrior, but there was no way he could stand against her. He ducked his left side out past the wall’s lip just long enough for the targeting lock to ring clear and true. Just long enough to launch his LRMs. He was too close for the warheads to arms themselves.

But their guidance systems took them right in.

Quinn’s *Thug* staggered under the sheer force of the kinetic energy the missiles pounded into her torso. Her imbalance only lasted a second or two.

But that was all Aleksandr needed.

When the missiles hit he was already on the move, already coming out from behind his cover, reticle dropped over the *Thug*’s left knee. He pulled into his main trigger, sending autocannon shells smashing into the vulnerable joint, followed quickly by a flight of SRMs.

And then a volley with his lasers.

Heat spiked in his cockpit, but still he held the shot, trying to burn through to the joint underneath. *Trying to burn her down.*

Quinn staggered under the furious assault. Any other MechWarrior would have gone down under the attack.

But Mary Quinn was a magician.

Somehow he kept her feet, even as emerald fire melted armor and burned away myomer.

She struck back with both PPCs.

The shrill warble of the heat alarm sounded in Aleksandr’s cockpit even as the armor schematic flashed from green to yellow. Aleksandr slapped the override.

Without letting go of his trigger.

The alarm sounded again.

Aleksandr clenched his jaw. He was seconds away from losing magnetic containment, from going up like a small sun.

He shouted and released his trigger. Staggered back towards cover.

But this time he wasn't so lucky.

Quinn launched a flight of SRMs. They caught him in the left leg.

Aleksandr felt the leg give way and fought his 'Mech all the way down. Somehow he managed to wrestle it into a kneeling position. Like a samurai committing *seppuku*.

Waiting for the killing blow.

"You have fought well, Kerensky," said Quinn, "but not well enough."

"And you have disgraced yourself," said Aleksandr, "but you are too much of a fool to realize it."

"*Silence,*" she roared.

"You serve a master too weak, too *afraid*, to show his face. The Coordinator." Aleksandr snorted. "This great emperor of the stars hides behind *your* honor. I wonder if he knows how poor a shelter it is."

"You will die for those words," Quinn snarled. Careful of the left leg she stalked behind him.

"Will, I?" said Aleksandr. "Very well. It is a good day to die. But know this: I die for the Star League. You are a great warrior *Quinn-sama*, but you are not a champion. Champions stand for something. And you stand for *nothing*. And *that* is the true meaning of *ronin*."

Quinn's bloodcurdling scream echoed off the rocks.

Aleksandr's breath caught, but he did not close his eyes. He would face death with his eyes open.

The *Thug*, behind him now, released vast stores of furious energy.

Into the rock by Aleksandr's side.

His eyes flickered down to his rear monitor.

The *Thug* stalked off.

He had lost this duel, but still he had won a victory of sorts here. He was quite certain the Combine would not dare broadcast any more duels. Even so, there would be more *ronin*.

But Mary Quinn would not be one of them.

* * *

When the engineers came for his *Orion*, Aleksandr was surprised to find that Thanh Ng was among them. Aleksandr climbed down from his cockpit, dropped to the ground facing Ng. The American MechWarrior came to attention and snapped off a crisp salute.

Aleksandr returned the gesture.

Ng's right foot traced a cee in the dirt and he executed a perfect about face, marched off.

He and Ng would never would be friends, Aleksandr knew, but Ng would follow him into battle, would trust him with his life.

And perhaps that was the best a champion could hope for.