

DESERTION

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Ernest Nebfer stared down the line of men and women with a feeling of trepidation, as if he feared one or more of them might turn to face him back. He avoided eye contact, partly out of shame, partly out of resignation. Their faces were a mix of cold pale to burning red. Most were afraid, indeed it was as if the fear were a smell hanging in the air mingling with the sweat and the stench of death. Their uniforms were a hodge-podge of sizes and conditions—none that looked new or pristine. Against the bland gray skies and the thin haze of smoke that choked the battlefield, Ernest had not seen the sunshine in two weeks and had begun to wonder if he ever would. No, he knew the answer to that question. This was his last day alive.

The line stood in a long, narrow, shielded trench with sandbags barriers to protect them from the hellish open ground that was the killing zone. The political officer stood at the end of the long line and his voice bellowed over the distant rumble and roar of the exploding artillery shells. “You will move forward to the hill you see in the distance. That is Hill 215. The enemy has held that hill for two weeks. You will move up that hill and drive the enemy infantry off of it.” Ernest saw the hill and it was a vision of hell. The charred stumps of trees dotted the hillsides like grave markers. The grass was long gone, replaced with shell holes, craters, and death. Trenches scarred the hill near the top, nasty ugly lines and jutted in a myriad of different angles and directions. Between where Ernest and the others huddled under half-cover was a long slope upward to doom.

“Each of you carries a rifle and a clip of ammunition. Each of you carries a knife, a grenade and a satchel charge. You will rush the enemy trenches and kill them. If run out of ammunition you will pick up a dead comrades’. If you cannot find a gun or ammunition you will use your grenade or satchel charge. When they are gone, you will use your knife. You will take that hill.

“If you attempt to discard your satchel charge, we will remote detonate it. If you attempt to turn your back to the enemy, we will detonate your satchel charge. If you attempt to flee the battle, you will be shot. No one will return to this place alive. You will go

and take Hill 215 or you will die.” His words seemed to trail off, muffled by the explosion the tore up the muddy ground between them and the hill a mile distant. A moment later a rain of wet pellets of soil showered the long line. The camouflage uniforms were soiled with the ground the men and women would cross. All of the uniforms were missing their rank and unit insignia, but the lighter colored fabric marked where it had been. Each man and woman in the long line wore a black armband on each arm. For them, this was what designated them from the other combatants—that, and the missions that they drew.

The man next to him whimpered. Ernest looked down and saw the wet spot in his crotch and his nose caught the smell of the man’s piss on the ground. With all of the noise and smells in the air, it was strange that this caught his attention. The woman next to him fought to control her sobs of fear and imminent death. While he didn’t see it, he heard someone vomit and the sound of wet stomach contents splattering the muck at their feet. Ernest gripped his cheap assault rifle tight. There was blood on the stock, an indication of the fate of the last person that held the gun.

One man cried out. “I don’t belong here! This is a mistake!”

A large man, a Republican Guardsman of the Eighty-Eighth Division (The Scythe of Amaris), stepped behind him and hit his head with the butt of a his assault rifle. The crying man dropped into the mud. “Get up or you die now!” To emphasize his point he clicked the safety off. The sound alone behind the beaten man was enough to spur action. The man, trembling, rose to his feet. Ernest could see the tears and anguish etched on his face. He was surprised to feel his own knees wobbling under him. It slowly dawned on Ernest that he was as afraid as the others in the long line.

He understood what the man meant. I don’t belong here either...

Eight Hours Earlier...

Private Ernest Nebfer held his pistol squarely in the back of the woman in front of him, jabbing the barrel into her coolant vest. The pressure of the barrel kept her moving through the mud to the rear area headquarters, nestled in a low vale far to the rear of the fighting. She didn't resist but did turn around from time to time, making eye contact with him.

"This is a mistake," she said.

"Shut up," he muttered in response. If he didn't hear her words, he would not be tainted with guilt.

"I wasn't deserting," she replied a few steps later. "This was all a misunderstanding."

He doubted her words. At the same time he understood her motivation if she was attempting to desert. A lot of people were trying the same thing. That was why his patrol was out combing the edge of the combat zone picking up stragglers. In her case, a political officer had found her and already passed summary judgment. She was guilty. There was no need to bog down the decision with cumbersome witnesses and evidence. Ernest had his orders—take her to the rear for execution. It was not the first such trip he had made and he had learned an important tip: ignore the condemned. *I'm not listening to you.*

As they made their way down a hillside, stepping over strings of shark-wire, she paused. "I have a family. A daughter." Her words were pleading.

"There's nothing I can do," he replied flatly. That was the truth. The Republicans had troops in every village, town and city. If you defied their orders, you families were as good as dead. He had seen thousands of bodies in the last month.

"If you take me back to HQ they are going to kill me. You will be making my daughter an orphan," the MechWarrior said.

"If I let you go they will kill my family." That was the way of the Republican Guards. Fear, intimidation, reprisals, these were their hallmarks. Even if half of the stories were lies and exaggerations, the rest were enough to scare most people into compliance.

"You can tell them that I overpowered you. No one will blame you." She jabbed her hand into the small pocket of her shorts and

pulled out a holophoto. "This is my daughter. Do you want her to be raised without a mother?" Her eyes were wet with forming tears as she shoved the image in front of him.

For a long second he looked at the image in her hands before reaching out and taking it himself. The little girl was cute and from the image he could tell that it had been taken before the war, before the Star League Defense Forces had begun their attempt to wrestle the world from the grip of Amaris. Such photos were not taken any longer. Nuclear weapons had devastated many cities and others had been razed by battle. The little girl's smile tore at him and he felt his face sag with empathy.

The MechWarrior he had been escorting chimed in, striking at his emotions when he was down. "You and me, we both don't care for Amaris or his goons. You were forced to serve just like me. We're both from this planet, I can tell. This isn't even our war. I have no desire to kill SLDF warriors. They represent the rightful government. You know that too—don't you?"

Her words stung deeply. He had been drafted, at least that was what the Republicans called it. They showed up one night and dragged him from his life, his apartment, his family and his friends. Ernest had been sent to basic training for four weeks and found himself on the front lines two weeks later.

Ernest hated the Republican Guards and Amaris. He had fought because the alternative was death for him and his family. Refusing orders brought swift retribution. Still, like the news media said, it was the arrival of the SLDF that had brought the war to Procyon. He wished they had skipped his planet, had spared the cities and countryside the death and destruction. The SLDF treated every enclave of Amaris' forces as if they were a cancer that had to be eradicated; brutally, savagely. If he had a choice of sides in the war, he would rather be fighting for them. If he had a choice, he would ultimately prefer to not fight at all.

All of the thoughts boiled to the surface as he stared at the holophoto. The happy little girl seemed to stare into his green eyes. When he looked at his prisoner he saw the same nose and emerald eyes in her mother. Ernest had a sister that was just a few years older than the little girl in the holo. "You have to help me—you're the only one who can." She eyed his name tag on his fatigues, "Private Nebfer, if you don't help me, I'll be dead within the hour."

He handed the image back and tried to avert his eyes.

"No one will have to know. Just let me get away. You can tell them anything, tell them I had a concealed weapon. Tell them anything! You are a nice guy, not a party to murder. You take me in and you are as guilty as the men pulling the triggers on the firing squad." He finally realized that they had stopped walking.

This is all wrong. One day he woke up and the Star League he had known from his youth was gone, replaced with the armies of Amaris. It had started out subtly, slowly. A few of his older friends who were vocal about the new First Lord disappeared. There were numerous rumors and constant terror. Then the signs of change seemed to come like a summer storm. Many people were suffering under the heel of the Usurper. Torture was no longer a veiled thing but commonplace. Summary executions were common. Ernest had been ripped from his job and livelihood and forced into battle against the very army he idolized. His home world of Procyon had lost entire cities in the fighting.

Now *they* were trying to turn him into a murderer.

The shame was overwhelming. He looked at her and studied her eyes. This was not a criminal, it was someone just like him. I can't be the one that takes that little girl's mother away from her. He glanced around to see if there was anyone in the vicinity before he spoke.

"Run," he said under his breath.

She didn't hesitate. Within three beats of his heart she was gone from his field of vision. He improvised a plan on the spot, a simple one—return to his unit as if he had completed his mission. He was counting on his commanders assuming that the paperwork had somehow been lost in the fog of battle. No one would care about a single person missing a firing squad. From what he knew, dozens were killed each day for desertion. One woman would not be missed, not with a battle raging only a few kilometers away.

The Present...

"We push off in thirty seconds!" the political officer bellowed. *We?* That would have been funny if not for the grim reality erupting in front of him. Ernest still trembled below the waist but resolved himself to the next course of action. The long sloping field of Hill 215 was littered with the debris of battle. Near the crest of the hill, just before the trenches was the stump of a BattleMech leg. The rest of the 'Mech must have been salvaged but the leg remained, blackened and defiant in the muck. That was where he was going to head.

Glancing over his shoulder he saw the faces of the 78 men and women in his impromptu unit. Some had already embraced their fate, they were already dead. Their often bruised and cut faces told their stories. They seemed oddly calm in the hurricane of death and carnage that they were going to have to face. Others were clearly contemplating turning on the officers. Ernest considered that thought for a moment but realized that there was a line of regular troops right behind them. Anyone crazy enough to turn around and attempt to get away would be mowed down instantly. No, there was only one way out of this trench—to rush up Hill 215.

He hugged his rifle close to his body, as if he could protect him. He closed his eyes and wanted to pray but he was not religious, no words seemed to come to his mind and he felt panicked that he could not find the words to utter.

The shrill of the whistle snapped his gaze forward. With leaden feet he emerged from the trench and leaned into the winds of war.

Two Hours Earlier...

The burly and overweight political officer sat at the table in front of him. "Did you think we were stupid, Private Nebfer? That we wouldn't notice your treason?"

"I don't understand." It was a feeble lie.

"Your prisoner was not delivered for her execution. You are obviously part of a cabal conspiring against the rightful Star League."

Rightful? Despite the propaganda, he believed the rumors about the fate of the Cameron family and how Amaris had risen to power. 'Rightful' was not a word that the Republican officer should have used. "There must be a mistake..." He found the lie harder to press. His voice was weak, drifting off.

"You let a deserter go free, a deserter with military secrets that can hurt our efforts here," the pudgy man said curtly.

"She had a daughter..." Ernest said.

"She won't when we are through. I have already dispatched a security detail to find her family and execute them." The Rim Worlds officer seemed to study him. "She seduced you, didn't she?"

"No." *Did she?* Had she played his emotions and manipulated him? He remembered her face and cringed at the thought. No. The tears were real, so were the pleas.

"You have been tried and found guilty of conspiracy," the fat man declared.

"Tried? I was never allowed to defend myself!"

"We are at war to preserve the Star League under Emperor Amaris. We called witnesses and two trusted men swore they saw you release her. That is all that is needed. There is no defense for what you did. We are in a war zone in the middle of battle." He heard the words and realized that the pudgy man could order him shot on the spot.

"We are fighting a war but you send squads out to kill civilians and kill men like me—when you need people the most."

There had been no witnesses. The memories of the little girl in the holo stirred him. If this man passing judgment on him was from Procyon he would have told him how the woman had pleaded, but

this officer was not from this world. He came from the Periphery under a soiled Star League banner. He was a seeded officer placed in the ranks from the Rim Worlds Republic. The Rim Worlds had fallen and such men knew that they had no place to go home to. Such men sacrificed others to preserve what little they had left.

"A review of your record shows this is your first offense. As such, you will not be summarily executed. This court is benevolent. You will be assigned to duty to the 405th Penal Battalion where you will serve First Lord Amaris. After thirty days' service you will be returned to active duty." He turned his head away from Ernest and looked at his noteputer.

A tug on his shoulder and a ripping sound jarred him. His rank and insignia were being torn off. Even his name tag was torn from his left chest. Two black armbands were tossed to him by a guard who began to shuffle him away.

A penal battalion...it was a death sentence. He wouldn't last the afternoon, let alone thirty days. The Rim World officers used penal units to conduct human wave assaults. No one ever came out of a penal unit, ever. He remembered a joke once that a penal battalion's only function was to catch incoming ammunition so that real soldiers wouldn't be hurt. Now he was going to one of those units.

No, he was going to his death. It was a certain as the sunrise.

The Present...

He ran clumsily, the mud sticking to his boots and holding him back. Yells broke out up and down the line that ranged from a defiant howl into a guttural scream in unison. He realized he was doing it too, howling loudly in an almost inhuman voice. An exploding shell left his eardrum muffled to all other sounds. His face was covered with something wet in the wake of the blast. As Ernest glanced down he saw blood. Not his own.

A high-pitched wail to his right made him to look in time to see one of the women of the human wave drop. Her face looked like raw hamburger from a wave of needler fire. From the trench at the top of the hill, lasers opened up. The crimson beams cut horizontally, taking out two or three of the charging penal brigade members in a shot. Ernest dodged to the right, then to the left as he ran up Hill 215. He felt a stinging pain in the left thigh but didn't look at it. It took all of his effort to rush forward.

A helmeted head raised up in the trench in front of him and he leveled the rifle and fired. There was no way to know if he hit or not. The head dropped quick. Ernest kept glancing toward the leg of the BattleMech...his intended target.

Another member of the battalion passed him, sprinting much faster. How the man moved so fast in the mud and mire Ernest didn't know. The man got thirty meters farther up the hill and his body suddenly erupted. A leg and arm spun in the air. *Grenade hit—had to be.*

Still screaming, Ernest grabbed his grenade, tossed the safety and hit the fuse, stopping only long enough to throw it. He paused as it arced in the air, falling just in front of the SLDF trenches. There was a muffled blast but he doubted he had accomplished anything. Mustering his will he charged forward again. His throat hurt from the yelling but it didn't matter.

A laser seared the mud in front of him, sending hot smelly steam into the air around his feet as he ran through it. The leg of the 'Mech he had wanted to reach was suddenly so close, a mere ten meters. He angled himself hard to the left and ran for the cover.

Something hit him in the torso, tossing him backwards then down to his knees. His rifle butt had caught the bullet and shattered. Two shards were stuck in his skin. From his knees he removed the strap of the rifle and tossed it. Looking up he saw the leg of the

BattleMech looming. Ernest rose to his feet and began to stagger the rest of the way up the hill.

Another howl of death came from behind him. He tore at the strap of the satchel charge and slipped it over his head. Yes, from here...he might just make it. Ernest leaned in and up against the blackened leg of the 'Mech. For a millisecond, Ernest thought that he might actually succeed, that he and he alone might take Hill 215. After all, he was still alive when so many others died.

He saw a BattleMech on a nearby hill. Small-arms fire peppered the 'Mech but it seemed to be ignoring that. It was defiant looking machine, a *Lancelot*. Ernest felt a pang of hope. The woman that he had helped—she was a MechWarrior. Maybe this was fate, maybe it was karma, either way he hoped it was her coming to his rescue.

The *Lancelot* turned down the hill at another wave of rushing men and woman as another wall of penal bodies was tossed into the meat-grinder. The *Lancelot* fired at them, scattering many to cover. Some were not that lucky. This was no friendly 'Mech. This was one killing people just like him. His hope shattered. No one was coming to save him. Ernest's eyes stung with tears as he stepped out and drew back his arm to toss the satchel charge at the trench. He hit the arming switch and chose the spot where he wanted the charge to land.

There was a sudden rush around him and he saw the clouds of the sky. Ernest wanted to scream. The pain was immense. When he opened his mouth only a gurgle rose to his lips. A coppery taste flooded him. His last moment alive he heard the hissing of the fuse of the satchel charge next to his head and realized that he didn't have the strength to get away from it.

Twenty Eight Years Later...

The hilltop was crowned with a cluster of trees offering shade on a set of benches at the top. The grave markers, stark white marble, covered the slopes with the exception of a walking path up. The grass was perfectly trimmed, pristine and brilliant.

The woman stood at the marker with a younger man at her side. She cradled the flowers carefully in her folded arms. The young man spoke first. "I never understood why Mom came here every year. Since she died, you've been doing it. Why?"

"She never told you?" the middle-aged woman asked, brushing the blonde hair out of her green eyes.

"No. Every year she came here and brought flowers."

"It was before she met your dad," the woman said, turning her gaze back to the marker in front of her. Carefully she laid the small bouquet on the ground in front of the carved marble, slowly, delicately, so as not to disturb the spirits that might dwell there. "She only told me once, a year before she died. During the war of liberation, she was a MechWarrior. She was attempting to sneak through the lines to get to the Star League Defense Forces to pass them some information when the Republican Guards caught her."

"I knew she fought in the war, but not that she was a MechWarrior."

"She didn't like to talk about those before-times. They were going to line her up against a wall and execute her when a man named Nebfer helped her. He let her go."

"Is this where he is buried?" he pointed to the grave marker.

She shook her head. "We were never able to determine for sure. Mom eventually helped the Star League forces out. About five years after the war she began to wonder what happened to that man. The records were sparse from those years, war does that. It took forever to find out that he had been arrested for letting her go free. They assigned him to a penal battalion and he died in the battles near these hills right around the time of the final Star League Defense Force assault. His body was never found or if it was, it was never identified. Mom liked to think that he was here in one of these mass graves. She came once a year on November sixth to thank him for what he did."

The young man, her brother, looked at the marker. "Here lie the bodies of 399 members of the 504th Penal Battalion of the Eighty-eighth Republican Guard who died here in 2775. Most were citizens of Procyon, forced into service under threat of execution, and sent to their deaths attempting to take Hills 215 and 219 where these remains were recovered. Their lives were forfeit in the battles that led to our eventual liberation. While their identities are unknown, their sacrifices are not forgotten. Let us remember them all so that such crimes are never repeated..."

"No wonder she never spoke about the war," he said.

His sister nodded. "She always said her life started over when she met your dad." There was a moment of silence as if she were searching for the right words, to explain to her brother the meaning. She broke her eye contact with her brother and looked down at the flowers and carefully, almost child-like, blew a kiss to the marker. "The war was not a time that she wanted to remember, except for this man. She swore a promise to herself that day that she would not forget him, even if everyone else did. She promised to honor him. I made the same promise to her when she died."

Her brother looked up the long hill and then back to the marker. "We'll make sure his story is not forgotten. If it was important to her, then it's important to me too."

Somewhere in the vastness of the universe she knew her mother was proud at her gesture. She also hoped that her visit in some way pleased the man named Nebfer.