

BATTLECORPS

ECHOES OF DISGRACE

By Steven Mohan, Jr.

The House of the Absent Sun
Matar, Draconis Combine
29 June 2825

Some dark creature of the night slashed at Junshi Ukawa with sharp claws, sending molten white streamers of agony shooting up through his body. Ukawa bent away from the pain, tried to scramble clear, but the thing was on him in a second, all black scales and gaping jaws and needle-sharp talons.

"Please," Ukawa whispered.

The thing cocked its elongated head, regarding him with a single unblinking eye.

Then, quick as lightning, it bent, tearing through Ukawa's tender belly with those razor talons, snatching at the bloody mess of Ukawa's guts, and *squeezing*.

Ex-*Tai-i* Junshi Ukawa of the Unproductive Regiment woke with a gasp, his heart fluttering in his chest like a wounded quail, his body slick with sweat, unable to quite remember the night terror.

Maybe he just didn't want to.

"Another nightmare?" asked the little girl sitting on his cot.

"Shut up," snapped Ukawa.

He managed to force himself into a sitting position against the brutal protests of his muscles. He had taken to sleeping on the cold stone floor ever since they'd put the girl in with him, leaving her the cot.

(It didn't make much sense, because the girl never seemed to sleep, but then it was just one of many things in Ukawa's tenuous existence that didn't make much sense. In the end, he let her have the cot anyway because it seemed like the decent thing to do.)

Sleeping on the cold, hard stone left him aching and bent. It was like taking a beating every single night, which was why, Ukawa supposed, the guards had put the little girl in his cell. It must've greatly amused them to torment him without even lifting a hand.

"The nightmares won't go away until you talk to someone," said the little girl.

"I said shut up!" Ukawa screamed.

The girl shrugged and said nothing further. She wasn't really a *little* girl, she was somewhere between twelve and fourteen, though she'd never volunteered her age and he'd never asked. She was pretty in the way that only youth can be, shoulder-length blond hair, hazel eyes, just a girl, but starting to show the shape of the woman she'd become. Ukawa could never remember what she called herself: Turner or Tucker or Tanner or some other *gaijin* name.

The scrape of stone against stone jerked Ukawa's attention toward the cell door. A woman stepped inside, a woman Ukawa had never seen before. She was lovely, skin the color of cream set off by green eyes and flaming red hair. She was dressed entirely in black, with no insignia to offer a clue as to who she might be or what she might want.

And she was young.

Ukawa wasn't sure exactly how long he'd spent in The House of the Absent Sun, twenty years or maybe thirty. At first, he'd tried to keep track of each day by lightly scratching marks in his cell wall, but the guards beat him for it. Counting days provided a sour kind of hope and Ukawa had come to realize that hope was the one thing that would never be permitted here. So he didn't know precisely how long he'd been imprisoned, but he did know it had been many, many years.

So many that this improbably beautiful woman must've been a child when Ukawa had committed the terrible act that had led to his disgrace.

The woman raised an eyebrow. "Rough morning?"

Ukawa blinked and then remembered he'd just been screaming. "*lie*," he said and then stopped abruptly because he wasn't sure how to address her.

The girl looked up, but said nothing.

"I trust your accommodations are comfortable," said the woman, "no complaints?"

Ukawa blinked again, wondering if this woman was real. Wondering if his endless captivity had finally driven him mad.

"What do you want?" Ukawa asked evenly.

"I've come to offer you a glorious thing *Tai-i* Ukawa. The chance to serve the Combine again."

The little girl frowned.

"I am disgraced," said Ukawa, skepticism shading his voice.

"Even disgrace may be washed away if you have the will to serve your Coordinator."

Ukawa's throat tightened with emotion. To be made whole again. In all the years he'd been in The House of the Absent Sun he'd never for one second stopped dreaming of this moment, even though he'd never for one second believed it would ever really come. "What do you want me to do?" he croaked.

"The DCMS is planning an attack on the Federated Suns world of Scheat. We want you to lead it."

Ukawa suddenly found his mouth was dry. "You want me to *fight*?"

The woman smiled, a bright, beautiful smile. "Of course. What do you imagine can wash away disgrace other than blood?"

"Why me?"

"It will be dangerous," admitted the woman. "We cannot afford to spare a frontline DCMS unit. Your 'Mechs will be older and there won't be much support. Frankly, many of you will not survive. But it is another chance to serve the Combine. And for those who *do* make it back, your honor will be restored."

"This is a bad idea," murmured the little girl.

But neither Ukawa nor the woman looked at her.

Matar Planetary Militia Headquarters City of Rain, Matar, Draconis Combine 15 July 2825

Elation flooded Ukawa's soul, like the bright afternoon sunlight that gleamed off the alpine meadow, turning the field of gently-swaying grass a brilliant laser-fire green. The blue-gray mass of Eisenberg rose up behind the field, the mountain's flanks clothed in the dark green of evergreen forests, its summit capped by fresh white snow. Ukawa almost imagined he could taste the sharp bite of the cold mountain air.

It was only a simulation, of course, but for the very first time Ukawa believed the chance he'd been given for redemption was real.

It had been hard to believe before. Even when they pulled him out of the prison and quartered him with a collection of other prisoners and misfits, Ukawa still didn't quite believe it. This would be just like his tormentors: offer him a banquet of hope and then whisk it away just before he took his first bite.

That's what the little girl had told him before they'd pulled Ukawa out of The House of the Absent Sun. And Ukawa had listened to her. He didn't know what dark crime had landed her in his cell, but he had discovered that she spoke with an insight beyond her years.

But now!

Surely the DCMS wouldn't train them for an attack on the Federated Suns unless they really intended Ukawa's company to strike at the enemy planet.

No, this was real and Ukawa was not going to let this opportunity pass him by.

The mission objective was to take down the major economic centers of Scheat one by one, starting with the mine just outside the city of Valorie. If resistance was light, the Chain Gang would serve as the vanguard for a more concerted attack by a DCMS regular unit. If resistance was heavy, Ukawa's company would do as much damage as possible against the day a full scale assault could be brought against the world.

Ukawa didn't know what kind of resistance they'd find.

But he did know how to find out.

He pushed his *Thug* forward in a fast walk, leading his command lance through the high mountain field, the passage of the 'Mechs setting the ground atremble. Ukawa knew the footfalls of the great machines wouldn't carry far in the thin mountain air.

But they'd carry far enough.

Especially when you factored in the heat signature of the lance's fusion reactors against the frigid environment and the fact that they were following the main road, which itself paralleled a dark forest. They were bound to attract attention.

Which was just what Ukawa was counting on.

Ukawa's fire lance was creeping up an isolated mining road that cut through the forest and intersected the main road less than four klicks from their current position. If the enemy attacked now, Ukawa's fire lance would set the forest ablaze and force the Davions to choose between inferno and a toe-to-toe slugfest with the medium and heavy 'Mechs of his command lance.

And to top it all off, his scout lance was hidden in the foothills to the north, ready to race in and hit the enemy's flank.

Ukawa had offered his enemy four vulnerable 'Mechs. Now all they had to do was take the bait.

The *Hunchback* on Ukawa's left suddenly stopped, gazing out over the field that stretched away from the forest.

"Chain Three, this is Chain One. Why have you stopped, over?"

"I'm not sure," said the idiot piloting the *Hunchback*. Ukawa knew his people by the names of their crimes. To him the *Hunchback's* pilot was War Profiteer, but with an effort of will he dredged the man's name out of the sludge of his memory: Roger Something. It was—*Culkin. Hai. Culkin.*

"*Culkin! What do you think—*"

"I think someone's moving." The man raised the *Hunchback's* arm, pointing. "There, to the left."

Profiteer's words sent a chill wriggling down Ukawa's spine. *Movement.* Ukawa triggered his command channel, the order to fall back a tickle on his lips, when the shrill warble of an alarm filled his cockpit.

Fire control radar.

"Inbound," he shouted.

He turned in time to see the orange glow of missile launch against the green horizon.

Then the first flight hit home, rippling across his chest, cratering his armor, and rocking him back on his feet.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ukawa watched the *Hunchback* topple to the ground.

The *Kintaro* and the *Champion* just stood there, motionless as contrails of white smoke corkscrewed toward them.

"Move, *Shimatta*," Ukawa shouted over his command circuit.

Then he stalked his *Thug* forward, toward the threat.

He didn't see the silhouette of a 'Mech against the horizon, so he was most likely dealing with LRM carriers and judging by the waves of inbound missiles, more than one.

Ukawa raised his right arm and let loose with a blast from one of his particle projection cannons. He didn't expect to hit the LRM carriers at this distance, but he could give them something to think about.

"Chain Four, engage with your Holly-5's *now*."

The *Kintaro*'s pilot woke up at last, launching a flight of LRM's from his left arm.

Ukawa glanced to his right and saw the *Champion* racing away from the area at max speed.

"Chain Two, engage with your autocannon."

"I can't hit at this range," answered Drug Mule, the *Champion*'s panicked pilot.

"Then move forward to bring your SRMs and laser into range. Do it *now*."

The *Thug* was the heaviest 'Mech in Ukawa's company, but in order to do maximum damage it would have to move closer to bring its own SRMs to bear. Until he closed to max missile range, the 'Mechs that did have long range hitting power had to go after the carriers, a fact that Ukawa shouldn't have had to explain.

He raised his arms, targeted a missile box, and fired with both his PPCs. The echoing report of multiple explosions and the incandescent orange fireball rising high above the horizon told him he'd scored a hit.

Ukawa wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm. It had been nearly thirty years since he'd been in the cockpit of a 'Mech and his repeated PPC fire had pushed his *Thug's* temperature well up into the yellow.

"Scout One, Chain One. Move in and harass these long range hitters."

The scout lance was made up of light 'Mechs, but close-in even light 'Mechs would make short work of LRM carriers, and led by MechWarrior Antalova's nimble *Jenner*, they had the speed to make a difference.

"Chain One, this is Scout One. Understood, sir."

Unlike the rest of these *kisama*, MechWarrior Antalova kept a cool head under fire. With Ukawa's lance hitting the carriers head on and Antalova flanking them they'd soon—

Ukawa's *Thug* stumbled as heavy autocannon fire tore into his right knee. Ukawa staggered forward, fighting to keep his feet on sheer instinct as the staccato bark of the autocannon rattled his machine.

Where was it coming from?

His eyes flickered down to his rear monitor.

What he saw there drew a gasp from him.

'Mechs boiled out of the forest like ants out of a kicked anthill, company strength at least, all of them targeting his 'Mechs' vulnerable rear armor.

Ukawa just had time to realize that the LRM attack had been a diversion when he saw a massive humanoid 'Mech rising up behind him. His warbook said it was a *Highlander*, a ninety-ton behemoth with a Gauss rifle for a right arm.

Ukawa was just turning to face this new threat, when the assault 'Mech raised its deadly arm.

Ukawa saw a flash of light as the gun's heavy magnetic fields accelerated the nickel-iron shell towards him at supersonic speeds. Then his screen and all his panels suddenly went dark.

Telling him exactly what had just happened.

Ukawa shivered, but it wasn't the sweat cooling on his body that gave him the shakes, nor the rattle of his labored breathing in the suddenly too-quiet cockpit that unnerved him.

It was the paint scheme of the *Highlander*: Davion green with red over blue highlights.

The markings of the Seventh Crucis Lancers.



"I'm just saying it was an unfair test," said War Profiteer loudly. "No way the enemy would've set us up like that." Profiteer was a short, pugnacious man, the kind who was in love with the sound of his own voice. He was also thin, almost *stringy*. (As were they all. No one gained weight in the loving care of Jinjiro Kurita's ISF.)

"Who are you trying to convince," asked Ukawa, "us or you?"

The man turned to face Ukawa, fury twisting his face into a hateful scowl, his ice blue eyes narrowed. "If it was so obvious, why didn't *you* see it?"

"I didn't say the ambush was obvious," said Ukawa calmly, "I just think it was plausible."

War Profiteer snorted, responding to Ukawa without actually having to deal with the logic of his comment.

Ukawa snared a cube of beef with his chopsticks, deftly caught up some rice, and put it in his mouth. The food wasn't good here, but the heavy tang of teriyaki covered up a multitude of sins. And they had real meat. Unlike The House of the Absent Sun where the only protein you were likely to get was whatever was crawling through your rice bowl.

Drug Mule leaned forward. "That's not really how it's going to be on Scheat, is it?" She was a mousy little woman with short blond hair and a pinched face that made her look perpetually worried. Maybe she had got that face because she *was* perpetually worried.

"No," sneered War Profiteer, shoving fish cubes into his mouth.

Ukawa shook his head. "You're wrong." If his people thought the morning exercise had been a fluke they were badly mistaken.

Antalova studied him curiously from across the table. The others in their little band knew her as Dereliction, but surprisingly Ukawa found it easy to remember her name. Maybe it was because, like him, she had once been regular DCMS.

She was a small woman, dark hair, dark, intelligent eyes, build like a sparrow. Ukawa suspected that not much got by her.

"Scheat is a backwater world," said War Profiteer confidently. "Barely defended. It won't be that hard."

Something in Ukawa snapped. "Those were the Seventh Crucis Lancers," he said, jabbing his chopsticks at Profiteer. "They are a tough, dangerous unit."

"And how would *you* know?" said a voice from down the table.

"Because *I've* faced them in battle before," Ukawa exploded.

In the sudden silence that followed, Ukawa sat back in his chair. He hadn't meant that to slip out.

War Profiteer shook his head. "There are no more Seventh Crucis Lancers. They were shattered during the last war."

Blood pulsed in Ukawa's throat, his wrists.

"Then why would the DCMS put them in the simulation?" asked Mule.

Ukawa desperately wanted to turn the conversation to something else, *anything* else, but he didn't know how.

Antalova looked at him curiously. "You've been in prison a long time, haven't you, *Tai-i*?"

An uncomfortable question, Ukawa thought. Way too close to the mark. "There is no such thing as a short time in a Kurita prison," he said gruffly.

"How many *years*?" asked Profiteer sharply. A whipcord tendon stood out on his neck.

Ukawa looked at the man. He might not know what he was asking, but he was a merchant, and Ukawa could see that he smelled blood.

Ukawa glanced again at Antalova. He might get away lying to the others, but not to her. He swallowed. "Twenty-seven years."

He watched the young MechWarrior put two and two together. Twenty-seven years. Unproductive Regiment. Seventh Crucis Lancers. Her eyes widened. "You were at Kentares," she whispered.

Unable to bear her probing stare, Ukawa stood and picked up his tray. He turned and left the mess hall, but not before he heard War Profiteer's voice call after him. "Why'd you end up here, Ukawa? Because you didn't pull the trigger? Or because you did?"



Later that night, when Ukawa settled into the warmth of his bunk (a real bunk, not the bare cot the ISF had given him in prison) he rolled over and gasped.

The little girl sat across from him in the darkness, watching him closely with her pretty hazel eyes.

Ukawa blinked and suddenly she was gone, nothing more than a trick of light and shadow.

He let out a long, shuddery breath and settled back into his bed, relieved that the apparition was gone. Still, deep down in some hidden part of himself, Ukawa was a little sorry the girl had left him. He might've learned something important if she'd stayed to talk.

That night his sleep was especially troubled with nightmares.

DropShip Dragon's Flame

En Route to Scheat, Federated Suns

28 July 2825

The *Union*-class DropShip was still a few hours out from turn-around, the midpoint of the journey from jump point to world, where zero gee would give way to deceleration. Ukawa cared little for the intricacies of spaceship operations, except that the transition heralded the return of gravity after a short interlude of weightlessness.

Ukawa hated zero gee.

He had been a prisoner most of his life, but before that he had been a soldier, used to the firm weight of earth beneath the feet of his 'Mech. Space travel always made him nervous.

Unsettled his dreams.

Which was how he found himself in one of the hanger bays, staring at the massive form of his *Thug*. The great machine was painted in a mountain camouflage pattern: irregular splotches of dark green, slate gray, white, brown.

The only color on the whole machine was a splash of red high up on the left shoulder, the same red usually reserved for the Kurita dragon, but this time shaped into a trio of links formed into a chain.

Showing that his command was a member of Operation Chain Gang.

The *Thug* was a proud machine, but this one had seen better days. In addition to the holosimulations, his people had done some basic movement exercises, just enough for them to get the feel of a real machine. Not nearly enough time to have any hope of being effective, Ukawa thought.

But it *had* been enough to reveal the *Thug's* numerous problems. The canopy was starred, which obscured his vision and weakened the protection it offered. The Tiegart PPC in the left arm was tagged out. Ukawa had talked to a tech. Apparently the DCMS just couldn't afford the spare parts to repair it.

There was more. The right arm PPC had a distressing tendency to stutter. And there was something wrong with the 'Mech's shielding. Temperature shot up whenever he used his energy weapons.

"It's a walking death trap," said a strong, clear voice behind him.

"It's the jewel of the company," said Ukawa without a hint of irony.

"I know," said Antalova slipping up beside him.

He looked at her. "We couldn't expect them to give us front-line 'Mechs."

The young woman frowned. Her dark hair was tied up in a ponytail, a practical style for space travel. Or combat. "We are faced with an impossible task."

Ukawa shrugged. "Does not the honor of a task arise from its difficulty?"

"I did not say 'difficult,'" said Antalova softly. "I said 'impossible.'"

Ukawa did not dispute her. He merely turned back to look at his *Thug*.

"They'll dump us on Scheat," she said bitterly. "Then this fine vessel will depart, leaving us to die. Our beloved Coordinator sows doubt and confusion in the border worlds of the Federated Suns and gets rid of a gaggle of criminals and all at once."

Ukawa admired the elegance of the plan and wondered if Antalova had the ability to see it.

"What did you do to earn a place here?" he asked.

Antalova pursed her pretty lips. "I fell asleep on watch. And failed to observe a Federated Suns advance." She turned her face away and her voice choked with emotion. "Nothing is harder to live with than a mistake."

"That's where you're wrong, MechWarrior," said Ukawa softly. "Everyone makes mistakes. *lie*, the true horror of war is that there are times when there are no honorable choices."

Valorie Metals Refinery, Eisenberg
Outside Valorie, Rhodes, Scheat
3 August 2825

The refinery that served the Eisenberg mine was a crazy thicket of pipes and valves and bulk tanks. In German, Eisenberg meant “Iron Mountain” and no doubt there *was* iron in that massive peak, but the material the refinery had been built to purify wasn’t iron.

It was pitchblende.

The uranium oxide was transformed into a gas and flushed through hundreds of meters of piping, separating the U-238 from its deadlier cousin: U-235. The refinery looked complicated and fragile. Easy to break.

Which was precisely why he wasn’t going to attack it.

A broad gravel road starting at the mouth of the mine arced around the mountain and dead-ended in the refinery. Half way between mine and refinery the road branched off, leading to the city of Valorie. An attacker marching toward the mountain on that road would turn right to attack the refinery.

Or left to attack the mine itself.

Ukawa expected the refinery to be heavily defended. And indeed Antalova’s *Jenner* had transmitted pictures of an *Awesome* sporting a forest green paint job trimmed with the red and light blue trim of the Second Ceti Hussars patrolling the kilometer-wide no-man’s land that ringed the refinery.

Ukawa *could* attack the refinery (and in fact that’s exactly what his orders were) but he had a company of half-functional ‘Mechs with no aerospace support, no armor, and no infantry. They’d be butchered.

lie, Ukawa had another idea.

“Scout One, this is Chain One. Initiate Phase One.”

Antalova’s clear, strong voice answered him. “Chain One, this is Scout One. Executing. Out.”

From his own concealed position Ukawa watched as Antalova’s lance of light ‘Mechs spilled out of the forest that bordered the no-man’s land and scattered, darting in four different directions.

It was a gutsy move, especially since their poor material condition obviated a big chunk of their speed advantage. Ukawa picked out the hitch in the *Jenner's* gait that betrayed the problem with Antalova's left knee actuator.

He waited just long enough to watch hidden laser batteries open up on his scout lance and then he was on the command circuit: "Fire lance, command lance. This is Chain One. Phase Two. *Execute.*"

Ukawa pounded his *Thug* forward, breaking from his forest cover and charging down the road, his heavy feet sinking in the gravel. At the place where the road branched, the fire lance took up defensive positions shielding the access road from the 'Mech counterattack that would undoubtedly come when the Davions realized the main assault wasn't against the refinery.

His command lance headed left.

Orbital photos taken by *Dragon's Flame* showed a gaping maw in the mountain's side, big enough to accommodate the giant dump trucks that hauled out the mine's ore. The photos showed that the mine was defended by a pair of small 'Mechs.

But there was one geographic factor working very much in the defender's favor. The mining road ran past a crystal blue mountain lake, limiting an attacker's ability to concentrate fire from all directions.

Ukawa's troops would have to hit hard and fast.

He turned a corner, following the road to the right, and stepped into a hail of autocannon fire. A *Sentinel* stitched a line of shells across his chest armor with the AR/5 Ultra Autocannon in its left arm.

Ukawa didn't slow down for a second. He charged forward, raised his right arm, and poured an azure whip of energy into the *Sentinel's* left knee. Temperature spiked in Ukawa's cockpit, but he kept up his fire.

The medium 'Mech staggered backwards under his assault, obviously fighting to keep its balance.

Ukawa cut his fire just as he reached the *Sentinel*. Then he reached out and aimed a vicious kick at the damaged 'Mech's knee. He stalked past as the Davion machine toppled to the ground.

He heard the high-pitched whine of laser fire behind him and glanced down at his rear monitor. The *Hunchback* was pouring fire into the downed *Sentinel*, proving, at least, that Profiteer could work something other than his mouth.

Ukawa stepped into a large clearing, the mine shaft on his right, the lake on his left.

A flash of motion caught Ukawa's eye and he fired on instinct, PPC energy lashing out. The enemy 'Mech stepped behind the curve of the mountain.

Heat roiled Ukawa's cockpit, bathing him in sweat. He coughed, choking on superheated air. His temperature eased up into the red.

The Davion 'Mech stepped out from behind its hiding place. It was a *Mongoose*, a lithe machine with a head that looked like its namesake and backwards-bending knees. The light 'Mech opened up with its trio of medium lasers.

The laser fire impacted Ukawa's chest, melting armor and pushing his cockpit temp still higher.

A single PPC blast might bring the light 'Mech down, but it would also roast Ukawa alive.

Instead, Ukawa centered his golden targeting reticle over the *Mongoose* and loosed two flights of Bical-6 SRMs.

The nimble *Mongoose* stepped back behind the limb of the mountain just as the missiles impacted, exploding harmlessly against rock.

"*Shimatta!*" Ukawa cursed.

If he could catch the fast *Mongoose*, he could crush it with his hands. He wiped sweat from his face. And if his cockpit temp ever dropped he could take it out with a few well-placed shots from his PPC.

If, if, if.

Neither option looked like a good possibility.

Ukawa glanced right at the mine's gaping maw.

Maybe he didn't have to kill the *Mongoose*.

He stalked his *Thug* forward, clearing the mine.

The light 'Mech ducked out from behind its cover and fired its lasers for a second. Ukawa immediately answered with a flight of missiles.

The *Mongoose* ducked back.

"Chain Two, head into that mine and do some damage. Concentrate on hitting the bracing. Seal it up."

"Affirmative, Chain One," said Mule, a waver in her voice. The woman was obviously terrified, but to her credit, she guided her *Champion* into the mine's opening.

Now all he had to do was hold off the *Mongoose* for a few minutes—

Ukawa never knew what made him glance at his rear monitor. Maybe it was that first exercise back on Matar where his lance had been decimated by the surprise attack from the rear. Or maybe his ancestors were looking out for him. Whatever it was, it was good fortune. Ukawa looked down.

And saw the massive domed head of a *Crockett* pushing its way up and out of the water.

Ambush.

The *Crockett* was a tough 'Mech, an Eighty-Five ton monster bristling with large and small lasers, SRMs, and a Blankenburg LB 10-X autocannon. On top of all that, its jump jets gave it unusual mobility for a heavy 'Mech. Just the kind of asset the Davions needed to smash Ukawa's fledgling attack.

He couldn't let the *Crockett* come ashore.

"All units attack the *Crockett*," Ukawa shouted, turning and loosing a flight of SRMs at the heavy 'Mech's head.

The *Hunchback* turned and added its fire to Ukawa's.

Not the *Kintaro*, though. It just staggered around in a drunken semi-circle, its back to the threat.

"Chain Four, *behind you*. Focus your fire on the cockpit."

The *Mongoose* ducked out from behind its hiding place and directed its fire at the *Thug*. Armor boiled off Ukawa's left arm, but he ignored it, focusing instead on the *Crockett*.

He raised his right arm, sighted in on the *Crockett's* head and poured PPC fire into the cockpit. The powerful weapon punched through the weakened armor, instantly killing the pilot. The *Crockett* shuddered and then slipped back into the lake.

Ukawa quickly pivoted his *Thug* and fired at the *Mongoose*. The PPC blast sliced the light 'Mech's right leg clean off. The *Mongoose* toppled to the ground.

At the same moment Ukawa's temperature red-lined. Safety interlocks froze his 'Mech as the machine's heat sinks tried to dissipate the PPCs tremendous waste heat.

Ukawa knew it would only take a minute or two to clear the heat load, but a minute or two could be an eternity in combat. Still, his lance had taken down the three 'Mechs guarding the mine entrance. Maybe—

His hopeful thought was interrupted by the deep growl of a diesel engine.

His eyes flickered to the mine's dark entrance.

The ground rumbled under Ukawa's frozen feet. Something was coming.

Something big.

It wasn't a 'Mech. The rhythm wasn't right. But—

A flash of construction yellow exploded from the mine, racing straight toward Ukawa's helpless *Thug*.

He just had time to think that it was the biggest *chikusho* dump truck he'd ever seen—seven, eight meters from wheelbase to the top of the cab—and then it smashed into him at better than seventy kph.

The impact slammed Ukawa forward and his safety restraints bit into his skin. The paralyzed *Thug* teetered on the brink of disaster and then it was tipping away from him, falling into a darkness he was helpless to stop.

Unnamed Town

Kentares IV, Carmelite Mountains, Federated Suns 6 November 2797

It wasn't the soldiers that were the hard part. The law of war was kill or be killed as any soldier understood. So what if some number of the enemy died kneeling in the dirt, hands clasped behind their heads instead of at the controls of their 'Mechs? It was still a soldier's death.

Ukawa could almost make himself believe it.

But Jinjiro Kurita had said, Kill them *all*.

And that order didn't end at soldiers.

Ukawa didn't know the name of the town, didn't *want* to know the name of the town or anything about it. By the time he reached the isolated mountain town the execution squad had already lined up the town's population in three even rows, all of them—men, women, and children—kneeling. Ukawa didn't look too closely at them.

It was easier that way.

By the calendar it was local fall, but the Carmelite region was experiencing an Indian summer and Ukawa could smell the heat on the wind as he walked toward the clearing where the town's people waited for him, a cruel heat that sucked the strength out of you, that baked you where you stood. It was a bad business.

The people waited for him in a cool clearing in the forest that surrounded the town, lent shade by a pair of oak trees. Ukawa stepped into dappled sunlight that smelled of ferns and grass and wildflowers. Dried leaves crackled under his feet.

Master Sergeant Kuzmin came to attention and presented Ukawa with the needler.

Kuzmin was a sick *Yourou*, a twisted little man who'd had the great fortune to discover on Kentares his unique gift. Kuzmin had a talent for extermination, a hunger for suffering and cruelty that made him perfect for the job.

Ukawa hated him.

He knew the only reason Kuzmin offered him the needler was because the man savored Ukawa's great discomfort.

Kuzmin enjoyed suffering of all kinds.

And since Ukawa was the senior officer there was no arguing about it. The *privilege* was his. He took the needler.

Ukawa started on the left of the first row, listening to the cough of the weapon, the dull thud of a falling bodies. You would think that someone would realize what they were doing, that the townspeople who outnumbered Ukawa's men four to one, would rush them, *something*, rather than just meekly accept their fates like sheep.

Surprisingly that almost never happened. It was like they denied all the evidence of their senses, all the logic of the situation, didn't want to believe it because there was nothing they could do. In this, killer and killed were alike, conspiring together to pretend that some other purpose had drawn them together.

All of that was ruined by the girl.

Ukawa moved methodically down the line, not really looking at the people or thinking about what he was doing, just mechanically following orders.

When he came to a child.

This was not a soldier.

This was not even an adult.

It was a little boy, maybe four or five.

Ukawa hesitated.

At that moment, the girl sitting next to the boy, holding his hand, turned around. She was pretty in the way that only youth can be, shoulder-length blond hair, hazel eyes, just a girl, but starting to show the shape of the woman she'd become.

"Please," she whispered. Tears tracked down her face. "Please don't do this." And then she did something terrible. She told him her name. "I'm Jennifer Tuppin." She glanced at the little boy. "This is my brother Samuel."

The little boy looked up at him and suddenly Ukawa couldn't do it, couldn't do it anymore, never again. His hands shook.

Behind him, Kuzmin said, "Sir."

And there it was. *No choice*. He had no choice. It did not matter what he thought. He was a citizen of the Combine. He would serve his people and his Coordinator.

Ukawa raised the weapon, using both hands to steady it.

His finger tightened on the trigger and then it coughed again.

Just as the girl dove in front of her brother.

She wore a pale blue cotton shirt that soaked up her blood, turning it black.

And suddenly Ukawa saw himself as the girl must: a dark creature of the night who'd slashed apart her middle, sending molten white streamers of agony shooting up through her body. Staring up into the elongated barrel of his weapon with its single unblinking eye.

"Please," she whispered.

"Not the children," said Ukawa roughly, knowing it would probably mean his life and not caring.

"Sir, you can't—" began Kuzmin.

"I am ranking officer here. *Not the children.*"

"The Coordinator's orders were very—"

Ukawa heard the soft sound of Kuzmin drawing his own weapon. Before he could think about it, Ukawa wheeled and shot him dead.

Someone tackled him from behind.

And as he lay, pinned to the ground by the weight of one of his soldiers, he looked into the hazel eyes of the girl, watched them close.

He closed his own eyes, not wanting to see what was about to happen next.

His murder of Kuzmin was his final act as an officer of the Draconis Combine Mustered Soldiery. And it proved to be a stupid and pointless gesture, because in the next moment he heard the cough of the needler.

**Valorie Metals Refinery, Eisenberg
Outside Valorie, Rhodes, Scheat
3 August 2825**

"Tai-i," the girl said softly. "You have to wake up."

Ukawa swam back to consciousness. The world flickered as it came back, like a bad video feed connection. He heard snatches of distant sound: the shrill keen of lasers, the angry bark of an autocannon, the rhythmic thud of a 'Mech's footfalls. He smelled burning diesel and rock dust and—

Smelled.

Ukawa focused on his canopy. The fall had smashed open the already weakened ferroglass.

He shook his head, trying to clear it. Laying on his side. Crazy angle. Must've gotten an arm out to break the fall.

What happened?

"Tai-i," said the little girl softly.

Ukawa blinked. She sat on the lip of the canopy, her legs dangling in the hole where the impact had stripped the ferroglass away.

"You made me remember," he croaked.

She shook her head. "I have no power over you." And then with a trace of bitterness. "You always had all the power."

"I did what a soldier has to do," said Ukawa.

She smiled sadly. "You know that's wrong, *Tai-i.*"

"lie."

"It's your mind that brings me here."

"I tried," he said. "Look what I gave up for you."

She shook her head. "I'm still dead."

A near laser blast shook his 'Mech, then edged into the deeper tones of blasted rock. She turned to glance out the cockpit.

What's happening?

Ukawa glanced at his rear monitor. The massive dump truck had been blown apart, some terrible explosion had scattered the bright yellow-orange pieces of its corpse across the mine's entrance.

But Profiteer's *Hunchback* was down and there was no sign of Mule's *Champion* or the *Kintaro*.

He glanced up and—

She was gone.

What was—

A flicker of motion on his rear monitor caught his attention.

Something passing. In front of. Mine entrance. Small head, high shoulders, heavy 'Mech painted in Second Ceti Hussar colors.

Guillotine.

In that moment Ukawa knew the mission was dead. Somehow the Davion forces had taken out his command lance, managed to keep them from blowing the mine's entrance. No point in fighting any more.

The *Guillotine* passed out of his rear monitor pickup. He heard it moving left to right in front of him, felt the earth tremble with its massive footfalls.

In his mind's eye he saw again the girl's hazel eyes, pleading, pleading for—*something*.

Some way to make it, all of it, right.

Ukawa reached forward, levered his *Thug* up, onto hands and knees.

The *Guillotine* turned, looked down at Ukawa's battered 'Mech as if curious. It was close enough that he could see the JumpShip/DropShip-and-three-of-diamonds emblem on the machine's left shoulder.

Ukawa glanced at his boards. They were awash in scarlet status lights. No weapons. Not much else either.

He struggled to his feet.

For an instant *Thug* stood facing *Guillotine*.

Tai-i Junshi Ukawa was a traitor to the Draconis Combine and a murderer of little girls.

He charged forward.

Maybe he could pay both debts with the same coin.

The *Guillotine* opened up with its Sunglow laser at point blank range, boiling armor off the *Thug's* chest. Ukawa charged heedless through a crimson inferno.

He hit the enemy 'Mech at a dead run.

There was an instant of nothingness, where the sheer power of momentum carried both machines through the air, and then a massive splash as both 'Mechs went into the lake. The *Guillotine* pilot struggled to free his machine, but Ukawa held on with a death grip.

And as both 'Mechs tumbled down into darkness, the frigid lake water rushed into the *Thug's* cockpit, washing clean Junshi Ukawa's disgrace.

