

FOLLOW ME

by Jason Schmetzer

***Joshua Martin Proving Grounds
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They were like children.

Gerhardt Stahl sat in the cockpit of his *Vulture IV* and watched the replacement troopers in his company advance under simulated fire from the rest of his company. They'd been out three weeks, trying to get the new people trained as soldiers. Abramov called them children, and the term fit.

"And I have to deal with them," he whispered. A tone sounded in his cockpit, and Stahl took up the controls of his BattleMech. It was his turn. The *Vulture IV* surged beneath him, the long myomer-powered legs thrusting forward and pushing him over the ridgeline he'd been concealed behind.

"Boo," Stahl said to the emptiness of his cockpit.

According to doctrine, the infantry squad he was attacking should disengage from the bunker they were assaulting, grab some cover, and fire anti-armor missiles at him. Each Scourge infantryman was issued a disposable light anti-vehicle rocket; they weren't much, but they were enough to damage even a 'Mech's tough armor.

He knew the replacements had been taught that. Master Sergeant Abramov had walked them through the routine a dozen times at least in barracks before they deployed to the proving ground. Stahl waited, playing the elitist MechWarrior, too concerned with other things to notice the tiny groundpounders on his display. He gave them the perfect opportunity.

All six troopers stood straight up and emptied simulated magazines from their assault rifles at the 'Mech. Once they were empty, all six turned and ran for cover.

Stahl stared. His fingers twitched on the triggers for his SRMs, but he held his fire. What was the point? He toggled the radio and ordered the exercise to a halt. The simulated weapons fire died off, but the sounds of battle lingered in Gerhardt Stahl's mind. His awareness crept backward in time, across the tide of stars, to his last mission.

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Master Sergeant Abramov's gruff voice cut through the interference on the radio. "Insertions teams are going in now, Captain."

Stahl stalked his *Vulture IV* around the perimeter. The target, a small firm that manufactured custom BattleMechs for the Republic Armed Forces, should have had a better defense team than the pair of Bellona tanks they'd shattered in the initial rush. Small arms fire flickered from the flanking buildings, but nothing too serious. The compound was roughly rectangular: three long assembly buildings with a squat administrative facility in the center. The assembly sheds were empty - not even any parts to scrounge.

"Where are they, Sarge?" Stahl asked.

"Maybe we caught them with their pants down," Abramov said. His voice was attenuated by the tiny transceiver in his combat helmet. Stahl knew the veteran NCO would be crouching behind his Anat APC, watching the field and directing his infantry fire teams.

"It'd be nice," Stahl said. He turned his head to watch the first of his infantry enter the administration building. The weight on his shoulders began to lift. This one was going to be a winner.

"Contact!"

Alarms sprang to life across the *Vulture IV*'s sensor board. Stahl jerked his controls to the left, away from the building. Red icons were flaring to life behind them, at the edge of the treeline. Coming through the park, from the city proper.

"Mechs to the rear," he shouted.

"It could be a feint," Abramov shouted. Stahl heard the keening whine of the Anat's motor spooling up behind the sergeant's voice.

"I think we already fell for the feint," he said. *His Vulture IV* ate the distance to the engagement zone in great multi-meter strides, weapons cycling.

"Now we have to climb out of it," he whispered.

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By the time Stahl had reached the assembly area and climbed down from the *Vulture IV*, Master Sergeant Abramov had already lined the new squad up and was dressing them down.

"This is not the Jokers," Abramov said. He was an imposing man, for all he was only 1.7 meters tall. He kept his head shaved. His square jaw usually housed a frown, and its expression this day was unusually fierce. "This is not the Fives." He stalked to the end of the line and stuck himself in the face of the tallest replacement.

"This is the Scourge, you pissants. The First Bannson's Raiders. We are the elite." He jabbed his head forward until the edge of his combat helmet smacked the trooper in the jaw. "You are now with the elite, pissant. You are not in some company security force. You are not 'shareholders.' You are *soldiers*."

The six troopers had come as a unit from the Band of Five. Stahl had kept them as a unit, in case they had any cohesion. Most of his infantry squads were understrength, but the chance of gaining a formed unit was too valuable to pass up.

It looked as though it had passed already.

"What did you think you were doing?" Abramov stepped to the next trooper in line.

"Attacking the enemy," he said.

"Really?" Abramov stared at the trooper for second, then bent down to scrape a handful of gravel from the field. He flicked one piece into the trooper's face. "Did that hurt?"

The replacement jerked his face away but shook his head. "No, sergeant."

“Master Sergeant,” Abramov corrected him. He flicked another stone. “How about that one?”

“No, Master Sergeant.”

Another stone. “That one?” Another. Stahl watched the replacement closely. The few other Scourge infantrymen around wisely kept their mouths shut; they’d seen this demonstration before.

“How about that one?”

“No, Master Sergeant!” The shout echoed across the field.

Abramov smiled. “Have I made you angry, trooper?” The replacement’s jaw worked, but he didn’t speak.

“Good.”

Abramov stepped away from the replacement. He reached over the next woman’s shoulder and took her assault rifle. He cleared the weapon, checked the action, inserted a magazine from his own harness, and jacked the slide. He spun in place and aimed at the quiescent *Vulture IV*.

Every replacement flinched as he burned the whole magazine off in a single burst. The live tracers loaded in the magazine made it look as though a green-colored laser were painting the BattleMech in sparks.

Abramov ejected the empty magazine and locked the slide back. He tossed the rifle at its owner. The woman yelped as she burned her hand on the hot muzzle, but she held on to her weapon.

“Does that ’Mech look damaged?”

“No, Master Sergeant,” every Scourge infantryman on the field chorused. The replacements looked around at them, but each of the Scourges were fixated on Abramov.

Abramov looked to Stahl. “With your permission, sir?” Stahl nodded. He steeled himself. This would be painful, but necessary. The Fives needed to know how the Scourge – the new Scourge, the one Abramov and Stahl and Colonel Wallace were building – fought. They needed to feel it.

“Lund!” Abramov pointed at the *Vulture IV*. “Do it.”

The scarred trooper reached across his shoulder and brought around a slender tube. The LAW rocket weighed only a kilo or two, but the small warhead was powerful enough. Lund extended the tube, dropped to one knee, brought the tube to his shoulder, and fired, all in one smooth motion. He dropped the tube the instant the rocket left it and was on his feet before the warhead struck.

The *Vulture IV* rocked but did not go down. As the smoke cleared, Stahl saw a fist-sized divot of armor had been blasted from the ’Mech’s chest armor. The technicians would have it repaired in an hour or so. The expense would be noted in his fitness report, but Colonel Wallace had made it clear he wasn’t reading that section.

It still stung.

Abramov looked at the replacements. Shock showed on most of their faces. The woman was sucking at her burned fingers, but Stahl saw a new light in her eyes. The lesson had struck home. “Does that ’Mech look damaged?”

No one spoke. The Scourges looked at the replacements. Stahl looked at them.

“Yes, Master Sergeant,” the woman said. The others looked at her, then stood a little straighter.

“Your rifle will kill a man at half a kilometer,” Abramov said softly. “I’m not going to tell you again. You can put the muzzle of that rifle against that ’Mech’s chest and all you’ll do is blow your

hand off. Use the tools you're given. Use the skills we'll teach you. Stay alive, and we all stay alive."

Stahl stepped forward. Abramov's words had struck home in a way they hadn't any of the earlier times he'd heard this speech. The troopers, Scourge and Fives alike, turned to face him.

"Who do you fight for?" he asked.

"Jacob Bannson." The tall trooper on the end spoke without hesitation. Stahl ignored him.

"Who do you fight for?"

"The Scourge," the Kuritan on the end said. Two of the others nodded, but Stahl watched the woman. She was watching Abramov. Stahl turned his head enough to watch the sergeant. The bald head moved infinitesimally.

Stahl stepped down the line until he was face to face to the woman. The tape on her blouse read Waite. "Who do you fight for?"

She pointed with her chin toward the Scourge infantrymen. "For them," she said. She looked down the line. "For them." She looked back to Stahl. "For myself."

Stahl nodded. "Back to the field," he said.

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Ten hours later the company assembled again on the gravel field. This time the troops stood in neat rows. Stahl climbed down from the *Vulture IV* and was not surprised to see corporal's chevrons on Waite's arm. Abramov left little to chance.

He was about to speak when an engine barked in the distance. He turned and watched as a battered J-37 ammo hauler sped into the assembly area. The support vehicle threw up a roostertail of dust as it spun to a stop a few meters from the assembled Scourge. The telltale ozone taint of fusion exhaust filled Stahl's nostrils.

"Kozaka," Abramov said. "I'd bet on it, sir."

"No bet, Master Sergeant," Stahl said. He waited while a lanky figure in a long dark leather coat climbed from the J-37's cab. Basil "The Edge" Kozaka was a distinctive figure around Archer. Colonel Wallace kept him on for reasons no one understood, but Stahl had an inkling. Every unit needed a rogue. A legend. Basil filled that billet nicely.

"Cap'n Stahl," Kozaka said, extending a hand. A single sheet of hardcopy flapped in the breeze.

"Basil," Stahl said with an easy smile. He remembered the feisty MechWarrior Kozaka had once been. There had been that time on Addicks...

"Orders," Kozaka said, handing over the sheet of paper. "From the Colonel."

"Wallace?"

"Roth." The distaste in Kozaka's voice was obvious.

Stahl smiled and looked down at the hardcopy. He ignored the whispers in the formation, and read the few lines quickly. The smile fell quickly from his face.

"Captain?" Abramov asked.

"Orders," he said, and crumpled the paper in his fist. He looked at the faces watching him, some familiar, some new. He saw the missing faces as well, the ones still fresh in his mind, the few with the dignity of a death mask burned into his memory. "It seems the Boss wants a new toy."

"A raid?"

"An investigation," Stahl said absently.

"A raid."

"We're ready, sir," Corporal Waite said.

Stahl just stared at her.

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The heat in the *Vulture IV*'s cockpit was enough to evaporate the sweat on Stahl's bare arms. He clutched at his yokes, willing the *Vulture IV*'s battered right arm to traverse faster. The damaged elbow actuator screamed, the metal-on-metal keening of burned-out bearing shrieking through the insulated cockpit.

The hulking form of a *Thunderbolt* staggered across his view, trailing smoke. A passel of LAW rockets blasted in and tugged at the protection over the *Thunderbolt*'s right arm. The heavy laser mounted on that arm flashed bright, erasing the Scourge infantry squad as easily as Stahl might erase a pencil mark.

"No!" he screamed, and jabbed his triggers. Missiles skewered the heavy 'Mech, just at the range where the warheads would arm. The *Vulture IV*'s big guns - both the deadly autocannon and the light-fast PPC - ate at the weakened armor over the heavy BattleMech's chest, finally chewing through and dampening the massive fusion reactor that powered it.

"We've got it!" Abramov shouted. The icons representing his insertion teams were headed back to their APCs. Stahl searched his tactical display, counting icons. Three of his 'Mechs were down, and God only knew how many of his infantry. Each of them a name, a face. A part of his company. His responsibility.

His family.

"Get back to the DropShip," he said. "Salvage teams out. We need to take these 'Mechs with us." He watched another sensor sweep run; the only active icons were Scourge icons, but there were far too few. The security troops were well-trained and had gotten lucky, but they weren't soldiers.

They weren't Scourge.

"That *Ghost* is mine!" a voice shouted. "I took it down!" Stahl searched his memory, washing aside the insistent nagging doubts about the battle, and identified the speaker. Lund, Third Platoon.

"Anybody confirm that?" Abramov said. With so many people shooting, it was often difficult to see who actually killed something. It was important in the Scourge: you keep what you kill. That was the regiment's unofficial motto.

"He's right," one of the tank commanders said. The *Vulture IV*'s communications suite tagged it as the single DI Morgan tank in the company. "We saw it. Shoulder-fired job, right to the cockpit."

"It's mine!" Lund shouted again.

"Learn you use it when we get back," Stahl said. "For now, let's get out of here."

Jacob Bannson had sent them to this world to obtain what they'd obtained. Stahl didn't even know what it was. He didn't need to know the specifics. He wasn't Bradshaw, after all, with a hard-on for electronics and tinkering.

He was a captain. A MechWarrior. He was a trooper of Bannson's Raiders, but he was more than that.

He was a soldier.

And he'd just gotten a lot of his fellow soldiers killed. Next time would be different, he vowed. On the souls of his dead, it would be different.