

The Beast

By: Akula

The rain softly pelted against the visor in front of her, leaving little streaks against the glass that seemed to match her mood. It wouldn't stop; it had been raining the entire time, and relentlessly backwashing the night sky with its indigo haze. If only. The rain seemed to be saying it over and over. If only.

Sara stared down at the blinking warning light on the console before her. *Irritating*, she thought to herself as she shakily slapped at the override. Only now there were little streaks of water running down her cheek, perfectly matching the raindrops escaping down the visor's glass. "It isn't fair," she growled to no one as she finally found the right button and shut down the annoying buzzer.

The MechWarrior finally broke her gaze from the flashing instrument panel, only to stare out into hazy darkness. She could barely make out the support girders that now sheltered her from the certain death that was waiting out there. Every now and then a thunderclap would sound, making Sara jump in her harness. That horrible sound kept repeating in her mind like the haunting cry of a jaguar on the prowl.

She found herself shaking even more as Sara stared out the visor as the rain slowly ran down the glass. *Roger.... if only.... No! No time for that now*, she thought to herself, *I have to find that...* She began to softly sob as she remembered what happened only moments before. How it had spewed its fiery death and left her here, alone.

A bright flash of lightning and a loud thunderclap made Sara jump but also brought her back to the present. The lightning's flash backlit the night horizon, only to punctuate the misery that had found its way into Sara's heart. The jagged lines of the broken skyline matched the jagged lines of her broken heart. Here, the hunter stalked its prey, taking another of her friends each time it pounced, leaving her that much more empty inside.

"I don't want to die here." Sara sobbed to herself. The shaking started again, a bit more pronounced this time; probably from the startle the thunder had given her and the realization that she was truly alone. "I can't stay here," she thought, "He'll find me and kill me...like...Roger."

Sara finally glanced back down at the control panel. The heat scale was in the red and warning lights were flashing all over the panel. In her frantic fight to escape, she had overheated her *Stinger* badly. She had fired so desperately to stop it, to save Roger, but she couldn't. In the end, all she could do is watch helplessly as Roger's 'Mech disappeared in a fireball.

After taking a few more seconds to calm herself, Sara finally managed to get the *Stinger* moving. It was hot, very hot. The actuators seemed to groan with each step the 'Mech would take. Slowly, almost painfully, the 'Mech made its way out of the battle scarred warehouse Sara had used for cover. The groaning was becoming almost unbearable as the *Stinger* took its first ginger steps out onto the rain soaked pavement, but something was wrong.

"Smoke? But, it... can't... be," Sara's thoughts raced as the white, wispy plumes made their way in front of the visor. Then another thought, "Steam! Too hot. He's gonna see me for sure!" Sara was almost in a panic now. Her 'Mech was too hot and would show up like a beacon light on infrared sensors.

Sara fought to calm herself as perspiration ran down her forehead into her eyes. The stinging sensation only agitated her more as she forced herself to breathe deep. "If you don't calm down, you're gonna die!" she thought to herself. "Think Sara, you have to think. It's the only way you'll get out of here alive."

Still shaking, she managed to find the radar screen, its soft green glow tried to assure her that nothing was out there, but she knew better. She'd seen it, what it had done. And now it wanted her. An iron beast that stalked its prey through a jungle of concrete and steel; relentless, vicious, and terrifying, and it wouldn't stop until she was dead.

Another flash of lightning split the night and Sara looked out at the devastation around her, if only for a brief moment. She saw the crumbling buildings, the burned out sedans and lorries, and the remains of one of the beast's earlier victims. Sara stared at the burned out hulk less than 30 meters in front of her, its charred inner skeleton barely visible once the lightning's glow had faded. Twisted and bent it told the story of its violent end, an end that surely awaited Sara if she didn't get out this city.

Sara glanced down at her console once again. She wasn't shaking as badly now, and could make out the readings on monitor in front of her. Her 'Mech was cooling rapidly in the torrent of rain, though not nearly fast enough. It was then that she noticed another pair of flashing red lights on her console, the ones for the heat sinks in her 'Mech's right leg. Both were steadily flashing red, indicating a malfunction. She hadn't been hit, she was sure of it. Then she remembered how violently Roger's *Spider* had blown apart.

"It's not fair!" Sara cried to herself as she slowly began to move from the safety of the warehouse loading dock. "Why?" she quietly sobbed to herself. "Why did it have to end like this?"

Glancing to her right Sara noticed the fluctuating red glow in the distant skyline. The fire where Roger's *Spider* went down was still burning. Sara knew she couldn't go back that way, the fire's glow would silhouette her 'Mech and make it an easy target. She'd have to pick her way through the darkness if she wanted to survive this night. And the beast was waiting for her in the darkness; somewhere in the shadows death was waiting.

Easing her 'Mech forward she headed down a seemingly deserted street. Her mind began to wander again as her 'Mech picked up speed. She remembered what had happened when they first encountered the beast, how Rico had died. She sobbed to herself as the event played over again in her mind, how the beast had blown the head cleanly off Rico's Firestarter, killing her friend and lance mate in an instant. They'd tried to avenge his death, but the beast disappeared without a trace, just as suddenly and mysteriously as it had appeared before them.

Sara snapped back to the present again as another flash of lightning lit the early morning sky. She took the opportunity to scout the area with her own eyes. She didn't trust what her sensors said anymore, the beast had appeared out of nowhere the first three times she had seen it. No warning, no sensor reading, nothing but the loud crack of its war cry as it took her friends out one by one, relentlessly stalking them through the urban jungle.

Reluctantly assuring herself that nothing was ahead, Sara eased her 'Mech past an empty intersection. "West," she whispered to herself, "the command post was to the west." Sara turned her *Stinger* to the right, bringing it to a westerly heading down a badly pitted and cratered side street. The damage here was extensive, almost as if the city had turned into the 'no man's land' of the Terran First World War.

It was spooky, and knowing that the beast was still out there only made it worse. Sara was sweating profusely, and she found herself jumping at the slightest movement that caught her eyes. "I wanna go home," she sobbed to herself as she gingerly picked her way through the wreckage that was once a thriving city street.

Once again, her mind wandered back to only an hour earlier. When the beast appeared the second time, spewing death from its bowels. This time it was Tina that died. There was no doubt; once the beast unleashed its fury, Tina's 'Mech simply disintegrated. The beast must have destroyed her ammo magazine, as small pieces of Tina's 'Mech rained down over Sara's own 'Mech making a pinging sound like hail hitting a tin roof. Sara fought back the tears as that sound played over and over again in her mind; she just couldn't forget it, no matter how hard she tried.

More lightning, Sara could see what was probably city hall in its fading glow. The building was burned out but still standing proudly in the middle of the city's square. Not that it had much left to be proud of. All Sara could see around her was destruction and death. There was not a single living soul to be seen. The emptiness was almost overwhelming, and Sara again began to softly sob as she made her way down another abandoned side street.

Another intersection, yet still no sign of the beast. Would she make it? Could she? She had only another kilometer between her and open grassland. In the open she could outrun it, but not here. This was the beast's hunting ground; here she was at its mercy. Sara knew the beast would show her no mercy; to stay here was to die.

She saw another bolt of lightning, and heard another thunderclap. It was raining harder now, the rhythmic beating of raindrops on her visor seemed to play a death march as made her way through the twisted wreckage of crumbling buildings. Sara couldn't see out the visor anymore, and her sensors simply were not locating the beast. If it found her now, she'd be dead before she even knew it was there, and that thought was terrifying.

Once again Sara's mind wandered back to the earlier events, to the third time the beast pounced upon its prey. Roger did at least get a shot off before his 'Mech erupted into a giant orange fireball. But the building that the *Spider* had been standing near gave way under the shock of the explosion. Sara hoped against hope that the building had simply buried his 'Mech, but she knew it wasn't so. She'd seen the one of the *Spider's* legs arc across the roadway away from the glow of the fireball.

Sara tried to kill it then, she fired madly at the place where the beast had attacked from, but when she stopped, she found herself completely alone. The beast had once again vanished without a trace, leaving her shaking in her cockpit and soaked with sweat. Then she panicked, she hit the *Stingers* jump jets and when it hit the ground again, she ran as fast as she could, finally hiding in the damaged warehouse.

Sara could no longer hold back the tears; they now flowed freely down her cheeks. Gone, all gone. All of her friends, her lance mates...Roger. "It's not fair!" she cried out loud, "It's just not fair. I don't want to be alone." The tears continued to fall as Sara's *Stinger* picked its way through the broken buildings and houses signifying the edge of the city, the boundary of the beast's domain.

Sara finally managed to regain control of her emotions long enough to look out the visor ahead. The rain was letting up now; she could make out the silhouettes of the buildings at the edge of the city. Two more city blocks and she'd be in the open, and out of the beast's hunting ground, two more blocks to survival.

She continued to look ahead, her eyes burning and her vision blurred from the tears she had cried. She blinked several times trying to clear her vision, with limited success. Her vision still slightly blurry, Sara began to throttle up the *Stinger*, speeding its gait as she neared her objective, but with her blurred vision, Sara missed the little green blip that had just appeared on her radar screen. The little green blip was only a few dozen meters ahead and closing fast.

Then it appeared out of nowhere, backlit by a flash of lightning. The ensuing thunderclap seemed to punctuate its foreboding presence. In the lightning's fading glow, Sara got a good look at it. Short and stocky, with uneven arms attached almost as an afterthought; it stood there blocking her path. Then she saw the toothy grin painted on under the dome of its rounded, battle scarred head. The grin seemed to sneer at her like a jaguar that had cornered its prey.

Sara stopped her 'Mech dead in its tracks, just staring at the beast as it stood there sneering at her. She couldn't help herself, she began shaking violently again, almost paralyzed with fear. It had found her; the beast had found her.

What happened next sent shivers down Sara's spine. The beast began to speak. Four words were spoken in a guttural voice accented by the rhythm of the driving rain. Four simple words that were both dark and foreboding.

"Now you die freebirth."

"I don't want to die!" Sara screamed back at the beast as she triggered the pair of Omicron 3000 medium lasers on her *Stinger*. Two ruby red beams of light found their mark as they carved into the beast's armor breast just below its toothy grin. The beast seemed to stagger for a second as nearly half a ton of molten Ferro steel rained on the pitted pavement below. But it was not enough. The beast recovered quickly and brought its short, fat right arm up level with Sara's cockpit.

“No!” Sara screamed again as she instinctively slammed her feet down on the ‘Mech’s pedals, triggering the jump jets and sending the *Stinger* skyward. Sara also triggered the medium lasers one more time as her *Stinger* began its ascent. But it was too late, Sara saw the fiery blast from the beast’s stubby arm just as her own ‘Mech left the ground.

Even as the beast sent forth its fury, the two ruby red beams from Sara’s ‘Mech reached out again. This time one missed wide to the right, scorching the already seared pavement beside the beast, but the other struck home. The beast swayed as the second beamed pierced its armored head, then it staggered backwards three more steps before finally crumpling lifelessly to the ground - not that Sara had time to notice.

For even as the beast staggered back in its death throes, a violent explosion tore open the night sky below Sara’s ‘Mech. The *Stinger* began to turn end over end, throwing Sara hard against her harness straps. A sharp bolt of pain surged through Sara’s body as something in her pelvis cracked. Sara screamed in agony as the next tumble forced her into the harness again, cutting into the already broken bones.

The *Stinger* continued to tumble through the air before finally landing face down on the pavement behind the beast. The ‘Mech hit hard, throwing Sara forward against the visor and cracking her neurohelmet. Sara could feel something warm running down her cheek as she struggled to remain conscious.

“I don’t want to die,” Sara sobbed one more time before finally succumbing to blackness.

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Sara could almost make out jumbled voices some where in the blackness. She could pick out occasional words, but nothing made sense. It was like she was underwater, hearing the sounds, but not knowing where they were coming from. And it was frightening.

“Am I dreaming?” she asked herself as she tried to separate the sounds. Then she remembered the beast, and that horrible night. “Am I dead then? Is this what its like?”

She tried to open her eyes, but her eyelids didn’t seem to want to move. It was like she was frozen in place. Sara began to panic as she tried desperately just to open her eyes, to wiggle her fingers, anything. But the more she struggled, the more the iron grip of blackness closed in, holding her there, not letting her free.

As Sara lay there struggling she finally heard a distinctive voice. “Doctor! Doctor! She’s starting to wake up!”

Sara struggled some more. It was like some invisible force was holding her down, pinning her in the darkness that she so desperately wanted to escape. She tried to scream, but she couldn’t. Something was in her throat, something she couldn’t move. Sara was almost in a frenzy when she felt something grasp her right hand. The object was soft and warm, and to Sara it was like a lighthouse in a stormy sea.

Then Sara heard a soft male voice speaking to her. A voice she recognized. As she listened to the voice, she began to calm down.

“Sara. Sara, this is Doctor Jensen. Sara, there’s no need to be frightened; you’re safe here. You’re on board the dropship Tiger Claw.”

As she heard the words, Sara tried one more time to open her eyes, and after what seemed an eternity, she finally succeeded. Everything was blurry, very blurry and too bright. Still she kept them open as things came a little more into focus. Finally she was able to pick out a dark silhouette to her right that must be Doctor Jensen. She fixed her eyes on the shadowy figure as he began to speak again.

Doctor Jensen softly spoke once Sara had fixed her eyes in his general direction. “Sara, you took a nasty blow to the head. You’ve been unconscious for almost a week. I realize that you are frightened right now, you’re disoriented and you don’t understand what it happening.” He paused for a moment. “Sara, if you understand what I am telling you, I want you to squeeze my hand one time.”

All her concentration centered on squeezing his hand- her anchor to the conscious world- and she finally managed to squeeze, albeit very lightly. She felt so weak. She wasn't even sure if she had squeezed enough for him to notice.

Doctor Jensen noticed the weak, barely palpable squeeze from Sara's right hand, but it was enough. "Good Sara. Right now, I'm sure you are very weak. You are probably having some vision problems as well. That will improve over time. Do you understand?" Another weak squeeze. "Good. Right now, you can't speak because we had to put a breathing tube down your throat. I wanted to make sure that you are well awake before I remove it. Sara, please don't fight it. I should be able to remove it in a few hours. OK?" Another squeeze.

"Good girl. I want you to rest now. I will be back to check on you in a little while." And with that, Sara closed her eyes and drifted back off to sleep.

Two days had passed since Sara had awakened in the Tiger Claw's infirmary. The pieces of that horrible night's events were starting to fall into place. Sara was feeling stronger, and the breathing tube had finally been removed. Sara's vision was also improving, but things were still blurry at a distance. However, Doctor Jensen assured her it was nothing permanent.

Still, her hips hurt badly, and she had a nagging headache that would not go away. She learned her pelvis had been broken in two places, apparently from the concussion of the blast from the beast, and that she had suffered a concussion when her head slammed against the visor. She'd hit hard enough to shatter her neurohelmet, which left a nasty gash across the right side of her forehead. Still, she was alive. She had survived her encounter with the beast. If only Roger had made it out as well.

She had several weeks of bed rest ahead of her, then even more time in therapy to relearn how to walk. The pelvic fractures were severe, not to the point that she wouldn't recover, but it would take a very long time. The thought of it was actually quite depressing, as if what happened that night wasn't enough to deal with.

Sara reflected back to that horrible night, trying to figure out what went wrong. But there was nothing to find, no one to blame, only the beast itself. It had toyed with them. Played with them as a cat does with a cornered mouse. Tormenting them before finally finishing them off. Why? It was a question she could not answer.

Over and over the events of that night played out for her. Rico's headless *Firestarter* falling lifelessly to the ground, Tina's *Javelin* exploding into bright white fireball, and Roger's *Spider* simply disappearing right in front of her. It was like a nightmare she couldn't wake up from, and that kept returning to torment her every time she closed her eyes.

If wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that Roger had been taken from her. It wasn't fair that she had lived when all her friends were dead. It wasn't fair that she was left alone. Sara didn't want to be alone.

Then there was the physical pain. It hurt to move, it hurt to sit up, it even hurt to lie still. And as if to add insult to injury, she couldn't even go to the bathroom without someone to help her. And it was a bedpan at that; she couldn't even get out of bed to walk to the facilities. It was like being two years old again. The indignity was almost too much to bear.

Sara was lost deep in thought when she heard a knock on the door. It startled her as the door slowly swung open and Doctor Jensen appeared "Sara, there is someone here to see you. I'll leave you two alone now," she heard him say as a blurry but recognizable figure was wheeled into the room by one of the orderlies.

"How are you feeling sweetie?" Sara heard the figure say as the orderly left the room.

It was a voice Sara recognized, but still she couldn't believe it. She was so sure of what happened. It couldn't possibly be, or could it? Sara could feel the tears build up as she stumbled for the words she wanted to say.

“Roger! Is... is that really you? I... I’m not dreaming am I?”

“No, you’re not dreaming,” Roger replied as he took her hand in his. “I’m real Sara, I survived. When I found out you had survived and were here, I had to come see you.” Roger’s voice was cracking as he said it.

“But how? I saw you’re ‘Mech explode. I thought you were...were,” She began to sob again. “I was so scared, so scared. I didn’t want to be alone.” The tears began to flow freely now; Sara couldn’t stop them.

“Its ok Sara, you’re not alone. I’m here with you, we’re together.”

“But I... I...” but Roger stopped her before she could finish.

“Shhh, don’t worry about it. Just remember that you and I are together. We will get through this.” He told her softly as he reached over and brushed the tears away from her cheek.

Sara was confused. This was a side of Roger she had never seen. The warmth and sensitivity were almost overwhelming. They had been seeing each other for a while, going and doing the things that off duty mechwarrriors do. But it had never been like this, never been this intimate. She had often thought about it, but this was the first time she had been sure.

But the undercurrent of happy feelings didn’t last long. Rico and Tina were still gone; Sara’s friends weren’t here anymore. Still... Still Roger had survived. Could Rico and Tina have survived too? Could it be possible? The confusion and mixed feelings surged through her all at once, a white-capped torrent of emotion. She had to know.

“What about Tina and Rico?” Sara asked. “I mean... we made it, is it possible that...”

Roger cut her off by shaking his head negatively. “They didn’t make it. I’m sorry Sara.” Roger paused for a just a moment as if to steady himself. “When I found out that you had survived... I asked about them. There’s no trace. But the damage their ‘Mechs took wasn’t survivable.”

Sara could see the pain in his eyes as he said it, and she felt her own tears building again. This time she didn’t try to hold them back. It hurt. There was no denying it. She simply let it out, mourning the loss of her comrades.

She cried freely for what seemed and eternity. The entire time Roger simply held her hand and tried to comfort her as best he could. She found it reassuring that he was here, that he wasn’t going to leave her. That she wasn’t alone.

Then Sara finally managed to regain her composure, managed to stop the flood of tears. For a moment, they sat there in silence. But there was something that she had to know, something that had been nagging at her since she awoke from the blackness.

“Roger, the beast, what was it?” She finally managed to softly ask.

Roger looked at Sara quizzically for a second, and then seemed to understand. “The beast? The enemy ‘Mech you mean?” Getting an affirmative nod from Sara, Roger continued. “It was an *Urbanmech IIc*, piloted by some clanner.”

“An Urbanmech? But it was so powerful.”

Roger softly continued. “When they salvaged it they learned about the ammunition, about the high explosive rounds he was using.” Roger paused again. “Those shells are what saved me Sara. When the *Urbanmech* took the leg off my *Spider*, the explosive force was just enough to blow my spider clear of the building. My ‘Mech still got buried, but not by the full weight of the building. If I hadn’t been blown clear, they wouldn’t have found me.”

Miserably she looked away as he said it. “But I left you there Roger, I just ran. I didn’t even...” she trailed off.

“Sara, if you hadn’t run, you’d be dead. You had no way to know I was still alive. I’m glad you ran, I wouldn’t be talking to you now if you hadn’t.”

“But...”

“Sara,” he cut her off. “When they found me, they couldn’t tell me what happened to you. I lay in the infirmary for days without knowing. It hurt Sara. It hurt to think I’d lost you. I can’t explain how I felt when I found out you were still alive, there are no words to describe it...” he trailed off.

This time it was Sara who did the comforting. She pulled his hand up to her cheek gently holding it there. Roger didn't pull it away. They simply sat in silence each reflecting on that night's events. Each trying to cope with what had happened.

It was Sara who finally broke the silence. She still had so many unanswered questions, things she needed to know. "So what happened to it? How did I survive? I can't even remember what happened."

"From what they could piece together, you must have gotten a clean shot at its cockpit before you went down. They found the *Urbanmech* almost fully intact and you nearby. Your 'Mech was hit hard. The lower left leg was blown off and you landed hard on the pavement."

"So I killed him?" she asked.

"Yes, but he deserved it. Don't feel guilty Sara; he was trying to kill you. He would have if he could have. He was playing with us, tormenting us." Roger answered.

Sara felt no guilt for what she had done to the Clan Mechwarrior. The Jaguars were well known for their viciousness and cruelty. After all, it had been the Smoke Jaguars that had massacred civilians at Turtle Bay. They were simply animals that needed to be slaughtered for the good of the civilized worlds.

Still, Sara was remorseful about what happened that night. About Rico and Tina and how she didn't save them. If only. Those two words came back haunting her again. If only she had taken out the *Urbanmech* the first time she'd seen it. But she hadn't, and now she'd have to live with that.

"Sara, it's ok," she heard Roger softly say to her. She had been so lost in thought that she hadn't noticed she'd started crying again. "You had to do it Sara. There was no other way."

They sat in silence again for a few awkward minutes. Sara's mind was racing. She had almost lost him once, and not said what she wanted to. She'd always been afraid before. But now it was different, now she was sure. She was sure of what she felt. She had to tell him, she wouldn't try to hide it anymore.

"Roger, there's something I need to tell you. When I thought you were gone, I...I felt like a part of me had died." Sara turned her gaze directly into Roger's eyes. "Roger, I...I love you."

"I know Sara, I love you too," Roger replied softly as he came close and gently kissed her.