

BE GOOD

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Port Howard, Towne
Terran Hegemony
14 June 2785

"The important thing to remember is that we're the good guys."

Toku Hisagawa scratched his temple with his right hand. The left hand, towed by the short manacle, dangled as he scratched.

"Is that a fact," Hisagawa said dryly.

"Don't take that tone with me," the man in the green-brown camouflage said affably. "I don't expect you to believe me. It's a difficult thing for you to hear, I'm sure. But it's the way it is."

"May I ask how you arrived at that conclusion?"

"Simple logic," the man said. He idly rubbed the sword-and-sun symbol on the helmet resting by his right leg. "Our realm is based on freedom. Not on furthering the glory of some megalomaniac emperor. Not on proving our superiority by conquering and enslaving races and nations we think are inferior to us. Simply on spreading freedom throughout the Inner Sphere. That makes us the good guys."

Hisagawa glanced at the blank wall to his right. It was metal. There was more metal on the other side of it. Then armor on top of it. Then, beyond that, the outside world, passing slowly by as the hulking prison vehicle trundled across the rocky ground.

"You're not going to win," Hisagawa said, trying to keep his defiance from sounding rote.

The man outside of Hisagawa's cage straightened in his chair. "Sure we will."

"Not this time," Hisagawa said, on the verge of detailing just how many Combine forces were on the way, and which units they represented, when he remembered that sharing such information with the enemy was generally frowned upon. So all he could do was repeat himself. "Not this time."

The guard didn't seem concerned. "Whatever you say, partner," he said, then stood up and donned his helmet. "Sit tight," he said. "I'll be checking on you soon."



There was a bump. Then a lurch. All of the furniture (meaning a metal chair, a table, and a bunk with a wafer-thin mattress) was bolted to the walls and floor. Hisagawa, however, was not. He had been pacing in his cell when the disruptions came, and he stumbled into the chair. He had almost regained his balance when another bump and lurch sent him sprawling onto the floor. His head missed the bunk's corner by mere millimeters.

The bumping continued, and Hisagawa decided it would be best to stay on the floor. The sound of explosions carried through the thick armor, and he was pretty sure he'd heard a round or two *thud* into the walls. Some of the vehicle's rocking came from the ground, but a lot of it felt like it originated from the top. The vehicle was under heavy fire.

Hisagawa had a brief hope that it was Combine forces coming to rescue him, but he threw that notion aside quickly. His people were not fools. They were not Davions. They would not put a larger strategy at risk to save a few individuals. If they were attacking the vehicle, it was for strategic reasons. Freeing him—or not—was incidental.

He heard the door to the small cellblock open. Someone took a few steps into the narrow corridor, then stopped. Another set of footsteps, this one running, passed nearby.

A voice called out. "Ryerson! Lock off the cellblock and leave the prisoners! Now!"

"Yes sir," a closer voice said, and Hisagawa recognized the voice of the soldier that had been guarding him. The footsteps receded and the door to the cellblock closed.

So the "good guys" were going to leave him to die. Hisagawa couldn't blame them—he would certainly do the same in their shoes. He just hoped he'd be taken out with a direct shot, in a big explosion, rather than being crushed under pieces of the vehicle as it shattered while waiting to slowly bleed to death.

A line of shots rattled across the outside wall of the vehicle. It didn't sound like large rounds—probably infantry shots, not 'Mechs—but if enough of them hit, they'd do plenty of damage. And by the increasing rate of the incoming shots, Hisagawa thought there would be enough.

He remained on the floor. There wasn't much to do besides brace himself and wait for freedom or death. Whichever came first.

There was a loud explosion, horrendously loud, ripping through Hisagawa's skull. Orange flashed all around him. Metal screamed, shredded. The floor lurched, heaving him into the wall. He tucked his head behind his arms, cushioning the blow, but then he fell back to the floor, which caught him squarely on the forehead. He saw and heard nothing.



Something dug into his wrists. Sharp, cold, rubbing spots that were already raw. His hands were being pulled away from him. For a meter or two, it felt like he was being dragged by his hands. Something on the ground was sharp, cutting into his legs. The pain in his wrists was worse, so he yanked his arms back. Something resisted, though, and kept pulling on him.

Hisagawa opened his eyes. Then he blinked, and blinked again. It wasn't immediately clear what the difference was between having his eyes open and having them closed.

But then a few things started to come into view. There was smoke drifting by, a lot of it, draining color and light from everything in view. Occasional flashes lit up the smoke like distant lightning on summer nights. The ground below him was a mess, shards of rock, metal shrapnel, bits of the tread of the vehicle he'd recently been riding in, and other debris. *They'd gotten the prison vehicle good*, he thought, and he hadn't yet moved too far from wherever it fell.

"Stand up," a voice said. It was hoarse and choked with smoke, almost inaudible as the sounds of battle crashed around it. Hisagawa reflexively spun his legs, trying to get them to support his body, but they were not yet ready to bear any weight. He couldn't get any balance and he ended up sprawled on his stomach, his arms still in the air because whoever had a grasp on the bar linking his wrists together hadn't let go yet.

"Stand *up*!" the voice said again.

"I'm trying, I'm trying," Hisagawa tried to say, but what came out was nothing more than grunts. But he was at least able to get his legs under him and start moving.

He could hear engines now. Vehicle after vehicle roaring by. All from the Federated Suns. Ambulances, reconnaissance vehicles, mobile tech labs, some on tracks, some on wheels, all of them fleeing. If the battle had been going according to plan, they would have been in the back of the fight, moving around the rear and giving support where they could. But Combine reinforcements had outflanked the Davion troops and shattered their side, breaking through to the back of the lines, putting the vehicles on the run.

Hisagawa blinked several times per second, trying to focus on the surroundings, but the haze, smoke, bright flashes and darting vehicles made it tough. And the spike of pain behind his right eye didn't help any.

But he was finally able to see who was dragging him around. It was the guard from the prison vehicle, Ryerson. The Davion trooper was waving at every vehicle passing by, trying to get them to stop. But the tall silhouettes in the distance, the walking shapes firing lasers and PPCs that could break apart the smaller vehicles with a single hit, were incentive enough to keep the vehicles flying ahead, ignoring Ryerson.

There were only a few vehicles left between them and the Combine forces, larger tracked vehicles with square bodies and all the aerodynamics of a crate. *Troop carriers*, Hisagawa guessed. Probably filled with as many troops as could get on board during the rout, while others were left to run for their lives and most likely be trampled by the approaching 'Mechs.

Ryerson pulled harder on Hisagawa's manacles. "Get moving," Ryerson said.

"Just leave me behind," Hisagawa said.

Ryerson snorted. "Let a prisoner go so his troops can just pick him up?"

"Then put a bullet in my head!" Hisagawa snapped. He was limping, favoring his right leg. Something in the knee felt wrong. "I can't move any faster!"

"You're insurance," Ryerson said, giving the manacles another pull. "You're not getting left behind, dead or alive. You'll keep up. I'll help."

Hisagawa tried to laugh, but some blood caught in his throat. His spat it out.

"Holding me hostage?" he said. "That will get you nothing. If the forces of the Dragon want to kill you, they will. It will not matter if they kill me too."

"You see?" Ryerson said as he continued pulling Hisagawa along. "You see? That's what I'm talking about. That's why we're the good guys. We actually *care* about each other. We don't go around killing each other like that."

"That is not a demonstration of virtue," Hisagawa said, though he felt as if his voice wasn't rising above a mutter. "It's weakness. Lack of conviction."

Ryerson opened his mouth to respond, but any words he said were lost in a horrible screech of twisting metal and scratched rock. Hisagawa turned, looking for the sound, and saw it immediately. A cloud of dust billowed toward them, and somewhere inside a critically damaged vehicle skidded across the bare ground.

Ryerson saw it too. "Come on," he said. "Our ride's here."



The dust was settling when Ryerson, with Hisagawa in tow, jogged up to the broken hulk. It looked like a large oblong pill that had been snapped in two. The broad ferroglass windshield in front was shattered, and Hisagawa thought he saw a few human shapes lying motionless in the cockpit. He noticed that Ryerson didn't so much as glance at them.

Ryerson pulled him around to the rear of the vehicle. It was quite large, probably as long as twenty meters, and a good four meters high in the spots that hadn't been squished by rolling on the ground. Smoke and a few flames came from the front of the vehicle, but the back looked safe.

Twin doors at the vehicle's rear were hanging open, showing what Hisagawa guessed Ryerson was looking for—two monocycles. Normally they would serve as ground-based escape pods for the vehicle's drivers in case they needed to abandon the ungainly hulk, which they probably should have done about ten minutes

ago. Now the crew wouldn't be fleeing from anything, ever. Their delay had worked out for Ryerson, though, who now had access to something faster than his feet.

Ryerson pulled Hisagawa's manacles toward one of the doors. In a swift motion, he undid the shackles, slid a piece of them through the door's handle, then relocked it.

"Stay here," Ryerson said and disappeared inside the metal hulk.

Hisagawa immediately set to work trying to pry the handle out of the door. He braced his feet against the doorframe and pushed, shaking his hands back and forth, hoping to pull or wriggle the handle loose before Ryerson came back.

He failed. Ryerson returned in a matter of minutes, carrying a cellophane-wrapped package. He saw what Hisagawa was doing and shook his head.

"Good strong Davion design," he said. "Won't come apart that easily." He went back in, freed one of the monocycles from its mooring and wheeled it out. Hisagawa still hadn't gotten the door handle off.

Ryerson undid the manacles to set Hisagawa loose from the door handle, and Hisagawa reacted. As soon as his hands were free, he pulled one back while using the other to hold Ryerson away. Then he swung a quick punch.

But he was too tired, too slow. Ryerson dropped his package and caught the punch easily, twisting Hisagawa's arm so that he dropped to his knees as pain exploded in his shoulder. The pain didn't start to ease until Hisagawa was shackled once again.

"Pretty weak effort," Ryerson said, then shook his package in Hisagawa's face. "You keep acting like that, I won't share any of my dinner with you."

So that's what he'd gone in to get, Hisagawa thought. The vehicle must have been a mobile kitchen before it became scrap metal. They'd gotten wheels and a meal in one swoop.

Ryerson pointed to the monocycle. "Get on," he said. "You're steering."

"Come again?"

"I can't have you in back of me now, can I? Too easy to choke me with the damn manacles. You'll steer—the manacles should give

you at least that much movement. And if you go somewhere I don't want you to, I'll put a bullet in your brain."

"That won't work out for you," Hisagawa said, "having your driver slump over dead while you're moving."

"I just shove your body off and take the controls myself," Ryerson said, grinning toothily. "Done it plenty of times."

Ryerson already had the engine running. All Hisagawa had to do was climb on and hit the throttle. He tried to speed away before Ryerson got on, but the FedSuns trooper was too fast—he was already on before the monocycle leaped forward, and he didn't say anything about the fast start. As far as Hisagawa knew, Ryerson hadn't even noticed anything.

The monocycle had pretty good speed, but it wasn't as steady over ground as the large Combine 'Mechs behind them. Still, the 'Mechs had to worry about shooting their Davion enemies, while all Hisagawa and Ryerson had to worry about was running forward. They opened up a gap between them and the approaching Kurita troops. They even passed some of the support vehicles that had whizzed by them when they were on foot.

"Slow it down!" Ryerson yelled over the rushing air. "We want to stay in the middle of the vehicles."

Hisagawa obeyed. Slowing down would give him the chance to look for what he needed.

His opportunity came five minutes later. He steered the monocycle past a light tank, a low-slung, wheeled vehicle with a long, turreted barrel on top. Hisagawa had no desire to see what would emerge from that barrel when it fired.

As he left the tank behind, he saw the rock. It was the right size—big enough to throw off the monocycle's balance, not big enough to completely destroy it. It would do.

He waited until the last possible moment, making sure Ryerson wouldn't be able to pull the trigger of his handgun when he made his move, then lunged to his right and steered the cycle into the rock. The cycle flipped into the air, sending Hisagawa and Ryerson flying. Hisagawa thought he heard a report behind him—apparently Ryerson had managed to get a shot off after all, but not before the crash robbed him of his aim.

Hisagawa buried his face in his manacled arms as the ground closed in. The impact ripped apart the sleeves of his uniform and a fair amount of the skin on his forearms. The clasps of the manacles cut into his wrists, but the shackles didn't break.

Hisagawa's legs were moving before he hit the ground, and as soon as he got them under him he was running back toward Combine troops. His knee still wasn't right, but this was his only chance. He could ignore the pain. He glanced once over his shoulder to see Ryerson immobile on the ground, then looked ahead and kept running. His arms wiggled awkwardly in front of him as he ran.

It was a repeat of the scene a few minutes earlier, as vehicles whizzed uncaring past him, only this time he was headed toward his troops, not away. If he could avoid being stepped on or blown away by the large front-line units that often had trouble seeing anything less than two meters tall, he'd be safe in no time at all.

He didn't hear the monocycle until it was practically on top of him. Reflex told him to jump before he knew what he was jumping from, and fortune pushed him in the right direction. Had he jumped to his left, the cycle would have caught him squarely in the torso and crushed his insides. But instead he went right, and the monocycle only caught him in the leg.

It was enough, though. He spun to the ground and pain speared all the way through his leg. He looked down and saw his left ankle hanging limp, useless. The monocycle that had hit him stopped to turn, and Hisagawa saw Ryerson perched on top, smiling.

Hisagawa tried to scramble on the ground, but with manacled hands and a shattered ankle he couldn't make any progress. He certainly couldn't evade Ryerson.

So rather than crawl in the dust, he sat up. He stiffened his spine. And he waited.

Ryerson sat ahead of him, motionless, engine puttering. Then he pushed the cycle forward slowly, until he was a mere five meters away from Hisagawa. He grinned again.

"This will be a fine victory for you!" Hisagawa yelled defiantly. "Running over a shackled prisoner! Much honor!"

Ryerson shrugged. "My job is to keep prisoners from escaping," he called back. "You're making it difficult to hold on to you, so I don't have much choice."

"Then at least shoot me! Allow me that death."

Ryerson made a show of thinking. "No," he said.

"Is this the right thing?" Hisagawa said mockingly. "Is this what you 'good guys' do? Run over defenseless, unarmed prisoners?"

Ryerson gunned the engine, then let it settle again. He looked thoughtful. "When you're good," he said, "you do the right thing. You worry about what people will think about what you're doing, how society might judge you. That sort of thing.

"But when you're *really* good," Ryerson said, his smile returning, "you win."

The engine roared to life again, the cycle leaped forward, covering the short distance between Ryerson and Hisagawa in mere seconds. But the cycle passed to Hisagawa's left.

Hisagawa knew better, though, then to feel relief. He stayed still and waited. Sure enough, Ryerson circled around again, and when he was thirty meters in front of Hisagawa, he bulled ahead full speed. Hisagawa called on all his strength to keep his body still and his spine stiff, and he stared straight at Ryerson until the moment came that the monocycle smashed brutally into him and took everything away.