

BATTLECORPS

SEVENTY

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NARROW AS THE BLADE
IS THE EDGE WHICH MEN PERCEIVE
BETWEEN FAME AND DEATH.

Kawana Takauji watched as his *sensei*'s brush traced the *haiku* poem onto the block of pale wood. The brush moved swiftly and confidently over the polished surface, tracing the complex letters in flourishes of dark blue ink. The hand that held it was steady, despite the excitement its owner must have felt. The face above it was expressionless, as calm as the shimmering dawn sky outside the high window of the chamber.

Nagamaru Okimoto set down the wooden tablet and carefully laid the brush beside it. He turned his head to gaze out the window in silence for a moment before he looked at Takauji.

"How narrow indeed is the line between fame and death, Takauji," he said, his face impassive. "How many times I might have gone into the grave, instead of writing that poem this day. And yet, would I have written the poem any the less? My actions would have written it if my hand had not lived to do so, for is it not said—the Way of the Samurai is found in death?"

"And yet, sir, you live and have triumphed," Takauji replied respectfully. "Sixty-nine victories lie behind you. Only one more, and you may found your *dojo*. Your name will live in the annals of Kurita for a thousand years. And it is fitting that it should, for you have done what few indeed achieve."

"Sixty-nine victories are mine, yes," Okimoto mused. "Yet is not death as likely in the seventieth duel as in the first? Are there not warriors who are mightier yet than I?"

"It is so, sir," Takauji responded. "Yet it is also true that he who has so many victories is not easily defeated. You have proven that you are more likely to triumph than not, sir."

There was a rap at the door, and both men glanced toward it.

"Come," Okimoto called.

The panel swung aside, and Okimoto's other student, Shimobu Yoshitora, entered. He was a short, squat man, unlike the lean and elegant Okimoto, but he too wore the ancient garb of the samurai. *Katana* and *wakizashi*—the long and short swords of the samurai class—were thrust through the elaborate sword knot at his belt. Okimoto noted with approval that the swords had been placed at the correct angle, with the curve of the blade upwards. So few of the younger warriors, he thought, were careful enough to notice such small but important details.

Yoshitora bowed, his flat, wide face as impassive as his master's.

"Revered *sensei*," he began, although Okimoto was not yet officially entitled to the honorific, "I come to report that your BattleMech is fully operational again. It is ready for your next duel."

"Excellent," Okimoto said, allowing a note of satisfaction and approval to enter his voice. He liked the generally cheerful Yoshitora more than the reserved and formal Takauji, although both were good students whom he respected greatly. "Take a seat, Yoshitora. I was musing on my mortality, as an old warrior sometimes does, but we needn't let that spoil a glad occasion like this. Takauji, is there any *sake* left?"

"There is some, sir, enough for perhaps two days," Takauji responded.

"Then tell someone to heat it for us, and we will drink together to the founding of our *dojo*," Okimoto said. The coming of Yoshitora—who was already grinning at the prospect of a cup of hot *sake*—had lightened his mood immediately. He laughed when he saw the looks on the two younger men's faces. "Yes, I say our *dojo*, not mine. Without students like you, a teacher is only a prater. And this is a glad occasion. We shall have a cup of *sake* and then go out to seek my last opponent."

Yoshitora sat down eagerly, while Takauji, inscrutable as ever, went off to arrange for the *sake* to be heated. It was evident that the young fellow was bursting to report some news, so Okimoto, smiling tolerantly, nodded to show him that he should speak freely even before the *sake* had been served.

"*Sensei*," Yoshitora exclaimed, "may the name of *Amida Butsu* be praised! I think that I have found the man to be your seventi-

eth opponent. He will bring you great renown, if I may venture my humble opinion in your august presence. I met him this day while I was speaking with the technicians about your 'Mech. He is a famous warrior of the Star League, a mid-ranking officer. If you choose to defeat him, sir, it will give even more renown to your *dojo*."

"Did you learn his name?" Okimoto asked. "And where he is to be found? If you have not forgotten to do these things, then we will go and see him after we finish our *sake*."

"His name is Hans Badeau, *sensei*," Yoshitora answered. "He is staying at the governor's mansion, detached on some local duty, and so it should not be difficult to find him."

HOW SHALL ANY MAN
TURN BACK THE HOURS THAT MOVE HIM
TO HIS DESTINY?

Thus Okimoto wrote before he set out.

Outside, it proved to be a fine, crisp autumn day. Okimoto and his two students breathed deeply as they strode through the city's streets. The scent of leaves was in the air, for many trees were planted along the avenues. There were already many people out walking and driving through the city on their various errands, but they kept well clear of the three armed men walking through their midst. The sharp glint of their eyes, the keen swords at their belt, the easy predatory confidence of their walk, told the ordinary folk that here were three Kuritan warriors who were very sure of themselves indeed, and correspondingly dangerous.

Okimoto, Yoshitora, and Takauji talked easily among themselves, though they were more formal than they would have been in private. Okimoto gave no sign, but his heart was flaming with eagerness and excitement. He craved the crucial seventieth victory as he longed for his next breath, or perhaps more. When he had written his haiku that morning, it had not been so much a humble declaration of mortality, but a statement of his own skill—after all, he had not crossed the slender line between fame and death in sixty-nine duels. The narrower that line was, the greater must be the warrior who had avoided it for so long. He wondered briefly if Takauji had seen beyond the apparent fatalism of the *haiku* to the shout of triumph hidden within.

"Here is the governor's palace," Yoshitora proclaimed, with as much satisfaction as if he had built it all by hand himself. Here was one, Okimoto thought, who would not see the veiled gloating of the haiku. Perhaps that was why he preferred Yoshitora—was it a weakness in himself, a flaw that would prove his downfall, if he favored the student who was less able to see his faults? Like many an obsessive achiever, Okimoto was gnawed by constant doubt and fear of failure, despite his outward poise.

Okimoto's doubt increased when he saw Hans Badeau stride out to see who was calling on him. His prospective opponent was the same height as Okimoto, and only slightly heavier in build. He had a high, beak-like nose that Okimoto found peculiarly repul-

sive, and a shock of reddish-brown hair that appeared to be in a permanent state of revolt against any kind of grooming. What disquieted the warrior, however, was not the ugliness of his opponent, but his self-confidence. It was not the tense, watchful, self-critical belligerence which Okimoto himself felt—a gnawing drive to excel fueled by the dread that someone else might surpass him or make him look a fool. It was the relaxed strength of true confidence—of a sureness so deep and sound that it was not even discerned by its possessor. Badeau did not even know he was confident—he had achieved the perfect spiritual balance that preoccupied Okimoto, but without even realizing it. Okimoto felt as if he just walked against a cliff of marble.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Badeau said. “What may I do for you?”

Okimoto maintained his outward aplomb despite the seething of doubt in his heart. The doubt made him angry, and his anger made his speech curt.

“Greetings, Badeau,” he said. “I have learned that you are a skilled warrior of the Star League. I was a *Chu-i* in the Kuritan military before the Star League lessened our strength. My ancestors have also served the house of Kurita honorably and followed the Way of the Bow and Spear. Will you duel me?”

The Star League warrior appeared to be somewhat amused by this abrupt challenge. The corner of his mouth lifted a little, and he raised an eyebrow in a gesture that Okimoto found offensively flippant. For so serious a matter, the man should show the proper gravity. It was true that Okimoto’s approach had been neither subtle nor very polite, but he was not in a mood to be reasonable. Indeed, he was already working himself into the state of cold, concentrated hatred towards his enemy that he usually nurtured before a duel.

“Ah, indeed,” Badeau said. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and pulled at the small point of beard there. “So, you are one of these Kuritan fellows that we hear about, running around stirring up fights so that you can found your own *dojo*?”

“It is true enough,” Okimoto replied. “But I take exception to the way you refer to the disciples of *Bushido*. We are not mere ‘fellows,’ nor do we ‘run around stirring up fights.’ We issue honorable challenges to all worthy warriors whom we encounter. In this way, our skills are developed, and the shortcomings of Star League training are revealed. Thus, all alike benefit from our activities.”

Badeau weighed the man before him silently for a minute. The bristling Kuritan did not bother to hide his animosity, but now scowled fiercely at the Star League officer. Finally, Badeau laughed—a sound that stung Okimoto's pride like nettles.

"All right," the Star League soldier said. "If I don't take your challenge, then you'll find some poor scrub who doesn't know any better to pound on. Shall we meet tomorrow, then?"

"I agree," Okimoto responded. "We shall bring our 'Mechs to the field three kilometers south of the airstrip, and there we will carry out our honorable struggle. Let the hour be noon."

"That sounds good to me," Badeau replied carelessly. "But, just out of curiosity, how many duels have you won?"

"Sixty-nine," the samurai answered.

"Ah, so you're just sweating for number seventy?" Badeau queried, raising his eyebrow again. "Of course, if any trouble is made about it, then your great leader will just say that you're a *ronin*, over whom he has no control. If you win, then you'll get a *dojo* from that same leader. Just as convenient as any other politics, I see."

"I am not sweating for the contest," Okimoto replied frostily, though he knew and Badeau knew that the words were a lie. "A true warrior seeks to test his mettle for the sake of the Way of the Warrior. Any rewards are mere incidents to the quest for personal perfection."

Badeau made a courtly bow in the old fashion to Okimoto, who returned the gesture stiffly. His two students also bowed, although, taking their cue from their *sensei*, they glared at the Star League officer belligerently. Okimoto turned to go, but as he did, the scabard of his *katana* struck the scabard of Badeau's dress uniform sword. The contact was not accidental; it was one of the many old Japanese challenges to mortal combat, though Badeau did not know it.

A PEACH-BLOSSOM MOON
AND YET, WHAT SECRETS CAN HIDE
BENEATH THE STARLIGHT?

Okimoto sat staring at the *haiku* he had just written. The spare, sleek lines of the poem held a wealth of hidden emotions. That was the purpose of *haiku*, of course—to suggest, to provide the seed that blossomed in the soul with many meanings, some of which the original poet had not even intended. What, he wondered, would a connoisseur of *haiku* make of his poem, if they were to read only that, knowing nothing else about him? Would they think that it was a love poem? Or would they guess that it was the poem of a man confessing his urge to use the blackest kind of duplicity to win?

Once more, there was a rap on the door. This time Okimoto said nothing, and Takauji entered anyway. The younger samurai found his master sitting cross-legged on a *tatami* in front of the window. One dim lamp shone in the room, while the window framed a deep blue rectangle of sky in which a great golden moon shimmered. Okimoto sat perfectly motionless, his hands on his knees, his *haiku* block before him. For a moment, Takauji felt that he had stepped somehow into an ancient screen-painting, not an actual room with a living man in it. But his heart beat quicker as he shut the door and bowed respectfully to Okimoto.

"Takauji," Okimoto said, "what I am about to say must go no further. If you refuse it, then I will not blame you. If you do it, then I understand that you do it not for your own sake, but for the *dojo*'s."

"I understand, *sensei*," Takauji responded, taking his place near the door as protocol demanded. He knew that this was not an informal occasion.

"Takauji," the older man said slowly, "I have read much about Badeau in the hours since we saw him, and I have spoken to some who have known him. He is not an easy opponent to defeat."

"The greater the opponent, the greater the honor in his defeat," Takauji said carefully. His guess was correct, he knew, but his mastery over his voice and expression was complete.

"He has fought ten challengers who followed the Way of the Bow and Spear," Okimoto continued in a flat, hard voice. "It is believed

by some that he has been sent to defeat such challengers by those in the Star League who think us an influence for disorder. Of the ten, eight were defeated so utterly that they found it necessary to commit *seppuku* afterwards."

Takauji said nothing, for no comment was needed.

"And of those eight, seven had won either sixty-eight or sixty-nine duels," Okimoto said. His right hand clenched involuntarily on his knee, twisting the smoothness of his kimono into wrinkles.

A long silence followed. The golden moon floated slowly toward the top of the window. The steady lamplight gleamed on Okimoto's cold, proud face.

"If I fight him, then I will lose," Okimoto said quietly. "One of the men he fought defeated me long ago. And yet Badeau destroyed him. I cannot withdraw my challenge—the shame would be such that I would have to...atone. If I fight him, then the same will happen. Our *dojo* will never be."

Takauji bent his head. He sensed the despair in Okimoto's words, and felt the desperation behind it—a desperation that might lead to recklessness.

"Yet, it is said," Okimoto went on inexorably, "that where the tiger is balked, the snake can find a way. Takauji, I know that you have studied the ancient and forbidden arts. The samurai is not the only warrior of feudal Japan who may be imitated. There is another kind, who could tell the hour by the dilation of a cat's pupils."

"The *rappa*," Takauji said. "The *grass*, practitioners of *ninjitsu*, the arts of stealth. Yes, I have studied their ways, though I am surprised that you knew of this, sir."

"There is a certain chemical, which, when introduced to a 'Mech's lubrication system, seeps into the machine's myomers," Okimoto whispered. "This chemical slackens the myomers, so that the 'Mech becomes slow, sluggish, hard to control. It can easily change the outcome of a battle. In a few hours, it fades away, leaving no trace. There is a box beside the door with a cylinder of this chemical, and enough ryu to persuade a technician, if that is needed."

Takauji sat for a long time looking at his teacher. His face was as blank and expressionless as the door behind him. Finally, he stood and bowed.

"As you will, *sensei*," he said, and left.

KEEN AS A SWORD-EDGE
THE NEW DAY HAS COME TO THE SKY
AS IF THIRSTING FOR BLOOD.

Okimoto glanced up at the slip of paper which he had attached to the bottom of his cockpit hatch. The *haiku* did not entirely satisfy him—it was too direct and clear, lacking subtlety of meaning. But it was the best that he had been able to write in his current turmoil. He was sure that he would win this battle—but a new doubt assailed him. Was he blackening his own honor too deeply by the treachery he had planned? Or was he serving the greater good by creating a *dojo* where his skills could be spread among the warriors of *Bushido*? He forced the thoughts and emotions down, and concentrated on the moment at hand.

Across the wheaten-tan autumn grass of the great meadow, Hans Badeau's *Black Knight* BL6-KNT stood waiting. The seconds of the duelists stood on a hillock far to the right, near a heap of rusting machinery that had been abandoned there long ago. Okimoto glanced that way, picking out the distant figure of Takauji from among the other men and women gathered there. His disciple wore a red kimono today, and the spot of scarlet stood out clearly amid the duller clothing of the other witnesses. If the garment's hue had some symbolic meaning, Okimoto had had neither the time to guess nor the urge to ask.

Okimoto engaged his *Guillotine's* systems and felt the 'Mech thrum with sudden strength around him. He sensed the condition and readiness of his war machine through the bulky neurohelmet. It felt like an athlete at the peak of his freshness and skill, poised for any struggle or challenge, prepared for the utmost effort.

As agreed, Badeau's *Black Knight* raised its left arm, and a medium laser stabbed upwards to the sky. Okimoto responded, firing a medium laser from his *Guillotine* to show that he, too, was ready. Five seconds later, both 'Mechs sprang into action.

Okimoto guided his 'Mech to the right, accelerating quickly while twisting his torso to watch his enemy. The feeling of the 'Mech's lethal mass hurtling about him awakened the fighting-mood in his mind, wiping away his doubts as if they had never been. The arena of battle and his enemy were crystal-clear, filled with an intense reality that made every detail seem to leap into his mind. At the

same time, the world outside the battlefield ceased to exist. He no longer noticed the patchy woodlands on the rolling hills to the East, with their ragged cloak of red and yellow leaves, or the city skyline to the north. His whole being was focused on the struggle at hand.

Badeau's *Black Knight* charged forward, zig-zagging unpredictably as it came. The 'Mech's right arm jerked up, and a PPC shot streaked across the grassland towards Okimoto's *Guillotine*. Okimoto slewed his 'Mech instantly, and the shot struck its left torso. The particle beam splashed away armor, and sent coruscating patterns of energy across the tough plating around the wound. Okimoto lunged his BattleMech back towards his opponent. His lasers flicked out at the same moment as Badeau's. One beam tore a furrow in the earth beyond the *Black Knight*. Grass blazed suddenly, then went out in a splash of gray smoke. The other two stabbed fiercely at the BL6-KNT's legs, slashing away armor, gnawing the 'Mech's adamant shell with fangs of searing light. Badeau's shots also struck home, and for a moment Okimoto's view was dimmed by a cloud of vaporized armor.

The duel was long and fiercely contested. Amid clouds of dust and the smoke of burning grass, the two huge figures circled each other, looming through the haze like demonic giants, gleaming with armor and shimmering with heat. Okimoto had never fought a foe so skillful or so perilous. Lasers stabbed like javelins back and forth between the great figures, their firing carefully timed so that the 'Mechs would not overheat. The pilots swerved and dodged, catching the shots of their foes on undamaged parts of their BattleMechs, seeking to gain the crucial vantage that could decide the battle. Okimoto's world became one of lung-choking heat, the searing flash of PPCs and lasers tearing at the armored bodies of the titans, the slam of mighty feet pummeling the earth, the shriek of heat warnings and the buzz of damage static in his neurohelmet. The world was savage, swift, and hypnotic, a fatal dance of steel and energy which would slay an unprotected human in an instant.

Through it all, Okimoto watched the *Black Knight* for signs that its myomers were weak and loose. The tokens were subtle—if they were too apparent, then the observers would know, and the trick would be easily discovered. After a time, he decided that the BL6-KNT was moving more slowly than it should. The *Guillotine* was a more agile 'Mech than its opponent, of course—mounting jump jets—but Okimoto convinced himself that the *Black Knight* was actually moving more slowly than that fact alone could ac-

count for. This gave him both confidence in his own victory and a pang at the thought that such an artifice should give it to him. The sight of his enemy's pocked and ravaged 'Mech, reeling through the smoke, gave him a strange feeling of sadness and disappointment—disappointment in himself and the trick he had used.

Finally, the critical moment came. The *Black Knight's* back, already wealed by a scourge of fire, was fully exposed to Okimoto's weaponry for an instant. Only for an instant; but in that flying gap of time, the *Guillotine* fired all of its weapons into the scarred, torn torso armor of Badeau's 'Mech. The great machine jerked and then sagged, and Okimoto knew, even as a wave of choking heat rushed over him and the *Guillotine's* instruments flickered and dimmed, that his alpha strike had killed the other 'Mech's engine. He was the victor; the seventieth duel was his, and the *dojo* could now be founded.

Yet, when he left his 'Mech's cockpit, his eyes were full of the empty darkness between the stars.

BATTLECORPS



JUST AS A LITTLE FILTH
SULLIES MUCH WATER, SO DISHONOR
BEFOULS A MAN'S SOUL.

Mournfully, Okimoto gazed at the haiku written on the tablet before him. Night and silence lay upon the world outside. This time, the brief verse of seventeen syllables was his final apology to the world, to his ancestors, his family, and his foe. The fact of the despicable trick by which he had gained his seventieth victory stood in his mind like a towering basalt obelisk, blocking out all light with its overwhelming shadow. There was no exit from the labyrinth of shame into which he had cast himself, save along that road which traces the hair-fine edge of a *wakizashi*'s steel. The weapon already lay before him, partially wrapped in rice paper and gleaming on a piece of sky-blue silk, and his eyes now traveled to it. The stateliness of inevitable ritual filled his soul, almost blocking out the human fear of pain and death. Slowly, he reached for the familiar cord-wrapped hilt. A moment later, the blade was in his hand. He paused for a moment to note the beauty of its gentle curve, the rippling smoothness of the *hamon*—or tempering-line—that divided the soft steel of its back from the razor brittleness of its edge. It was fitting that the instrument of his extinction, at least, should be something of such delicate yet lethal beauty—a *haiku* of steel, ready to write its tale in his guilty blood.

The door opened suddenly and Takauji came in. He shut the door and came to sit before Okimoto. If he was surprised to find his *sensei* stripped to the waist, with the point of a short sword poised a centimeter from his hard, flat stomach, he gave no sign of it. Instead, he took up the brush and the block of wood. As Okimoto watched—curious in spite of his despair—Takauji carefully traced a poem on the wood below his own, and laid it where Okimoto could read it.

TREASON IS A SNAKE
YET, WHEN BETRAYAL IS BETRAYED
HONOR IS PRESERVED.

"It is not as good as yours, sir, for it does not boast the same depth of meaning," Takauji said. "Yet it holds the truth. Think on it for a moment, and you will know that there is no reason now to continue."

Okimoto sat and looked at the tablet for a long while, while the stars wheeled overhead and, far away in the city, technicians labored to repair his 'Mech. Finally, he looked up at Takauji. For the first time in six years, the younger man saw a smile of true happiness upon the face of his elder.

"So my trick was betrayed," Okimoto said, a tear glistening on his fierce face. "You did not put the chemical into my enemy's 'Mech as I told you to. It was my own skill that defeated him, narrow though the victory was—'narrow as the blade,' as I wrote before. You have saved my honor and my life. The teacher was taught by the student."

Takauji laughed as Okimoto bowed low before him. "No, sir, we have taught each other. I have showed you that the fear of shame is as deadly a foe as any laser, or deadlier. Thoughts of how the world's eye will see you can destroy you as surely as any enemy. Yet I have also learned a mighty lesson. You have taught me that saving the life and honor of a friend is as sweet as saving one's own life. We have both learned something that has made our spirits greater. Come, *sensei*, shall we make a *dojo* whose renown shall endure for ten thousand years?"