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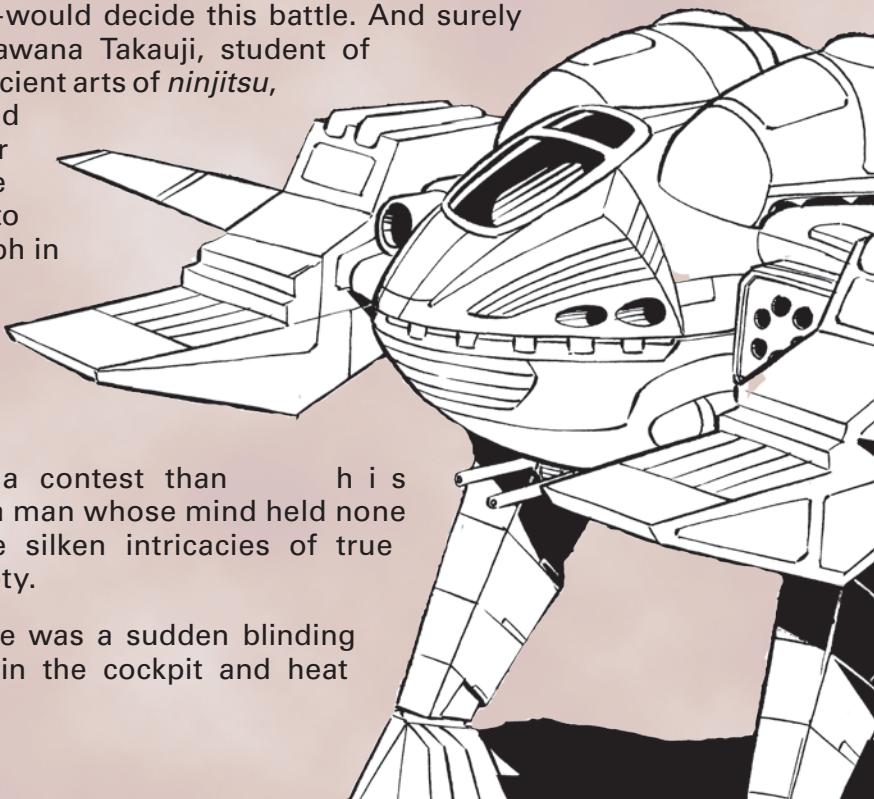
THE PEAR

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Heat rippled from the BattleMech's great limbs despite the cool early morning air. As the machine eased its way through the grove, showers of dew fell from the branches to hiss away in steam from the giant's metallic bulk. In the 'Mech's cockpit, Kawana Takauji's cold, impassive face was streaming with sweat. The left leg of his *Champion* CHP-1N was not responding properly any longer, and this made it difficult to move through the trees without creating a telltale disturbance in their crowns. The war machine's single heat sinks were laboring to shed the combined heat of weaponry and fusion engine, but there was damage in the *Champion*'s torso also, and Takauji suspected that this was interfering with the cooling system.

Still, he should be able to finish his opponent, provided that the other 'Mech did not get behind him. With its sensors blinded, its pilot would have to rely on visual cues. It was for this reason that Takauji picked his way through the grove of trees with such caution. Surprise—the sudden, fatal pounce of the tiger—would decide this battle. And surely he, Kawana Takauji, student of the ancient arts of *ninjitsu*, would be far more apt to triumph in



such a contest than his foe—a man whose mind held none of the silken intricacies of true subtlety.

There was a sudden blinding glare in the cockpit and heat

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signals screamed. Static exploded in the neurohelmet like a wave of thunder. Takauji's heart leapt against his ribs, and he actually cried out in astonishment. A moment later, the 'Mech's heads-up display went out with a popping sound. The huge machine slumped forward, sagging through the boughs. There was a muffled rending of torn wood and wet leaves threshed at the cockpit glass for a moment.

Takauji thought briefly that the 'Mech's slack mass would topple, and braced himself as best he could. The world lurched sickeningly, and then the machine rocked back, its gyroscope still keeping it upright despite the fatal shot that had pierced its back armor, destroying the fusion plant that fed power to its limbs.

Takauji waited a moment more as the metallic bulk around him swayed gently to stillness. Then he undid the hasps of the belts that held him in his seat and manually opened the hatch above him. Cool, fresh air flooded into the hot cabin, washing over Takauji's face and body as if to cleanse him of the battle's heat. A runnel of water also spilled over the lip of the opening to splash the front of his cooling vest and spatter on the seat beneath him. Outside, he could hear the heavy footfalls of the victor drawing closer.

A moment later, the impossible occurred. Takauji's 'Mech thrummed back to life around him. The heads-up display, which had winked out with such finality into darkness only a few moments before, blazed back into being. The *Champion* righted itself with a surge, its left leg now moving smoothly to bring the war machine back into equilibrium. The heat ebbed with astonishing speed as the heat sinks began their work once more.

Takauji had known, of course, that the heat and damage—indeed, even the weapons fire itself—were computer simulations, but it was easy to forget that in the thick of action. Takauji turned his 'Mech to salute the *Lancelot* that had defeated him. In a gesture made clumsy by myomers and thick-plated armor, the *Champion* tilted forward at the waist in an approximation of a formal bow. The *Lancelot* made the same gesture, and together both 'Mechs strode out of the grove and moved off across the meadows towards the distant *dojo*. Overhead, a circling VTOL broke away from the pattern it had been flying and also swooped in the direction of the warriors' home.



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Shimobu Yoshitora was grinning as he stepped from the *Lancelot*'s shoulder onto the catwalk beside it. His round, good-natured face was shining with eagerness and triumph. Takauji's face, as he dismounted from his own 'Mech nearby, was aloof, unreadable as stone. The men bowed formally to one another, then turned and bowed more deeply as their *sensei* descended from the roof to join them.

"You have both done well," Nagamaru Okimoto told them as he acknowledged their obeisance with a nod. "Victory and defeat each foster the seeds of wisdom in the heart of the warrior. Each is one half of a united whole, as the day and the night are each a part of a planet's wheeling in space. And so, if both of you learn, then both of you are victorious. There is no victory or defeat; there is only knowledge or ignorance."

"It is so," Takauji said, "but before there is learning, there must also be understanding. And, revered *sensei*, I do not yet understand how I came to be defeated. Yoshitora, did you see me as I entered the grove? I thought that you were still beyond the nearer hill when I entered it."

"Honored Takauji, I was," Yoshitora said cheerfully. "But the magnetic signature of your 'Mech was as easy to read as a festival banner at noon."

For a flicker of an instant, Takauji's eyes widened slightly in astonishment. Then, despite his iron self-control, his lips tightened, and Yoshitora saw a tendon stand out along his fellow student's jaw line.

"We were to fight with no sensors, Yoshitora," he said, his voice as brittle as frozen steel. He leaned forward a little towards the shorter, broader man, while his knuckles whitened on the hilt of his *katana*. "Before the battle, the *sensei* instructed us not to use any method save the keenness of our own eyes to find our adversary. Did you forget his words so quickly, then? And the honor of a samurai?"

Yoshitora's wide, pleasant face darkened, and his smile faded into a scowl.

"It was not my will that it should be so," he answered gruffly. "The *sensei* himself told me to use my sensors. You have no reason to speak lightly of my honor, Takauji. Never is a samurai's honor befooled if he does the bidding of his lord."

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Takauji turned abruptly to face the bland Okimoto, who returned his blazing glare calmly. The younger man's mouth worked for a moment, then he said, in a low, strained voice, "Sensei, for what purpose have you done this? Was this not to be an open contest between two warriors, to increase their strength in the Way of the Bow and Spear?"

"And how has it not strengthened you in the Way, Takauji?" Okimoto inquired mildly. "Did it not teach you that defeat comes from complacency? You assumed that you could rely on your enemy having no sensors. Had you not assumed this, then you might perhaps have watched more carefully behind you, and you would not have come to grief. Yoshitora is not your betrayer, but a friend who has gently instructed you in one of the lessons that many must learn only at the cost of their blood. You should thank him for having the kindness to admonish you."

Takauji clenched his teeth, but turned to Yoshitora and made a deep, formal bow. "Thank you, Yoshitora," he said coldly.

Yoshitora acknowledged the words and gesture with a curt nod. His own face was still sullen and resentful at Takauji's accusation. Both men were tense with suppressed anger.

Okimoto looked at the young warriors thoughtfully, and decided that both had been tested far enough for the moment. The past two weeks had been stressful ones for everyone at the *dojo*. Five new pupils had joined his school in that time, and their instruction had been added to the already full regimen of hard training that the existing students carried out.

"Come, let us leave the sword for the moment, my noble pupils," he said. "Let us think no more of the Way for this time. Let us drink tea together. The arts of peace are the left eye of the warrior, as the arts of war are his right. And just as the two eyes look to one point, so he who would truly balance his spirit should not neglect the tea bowl and the chrysanthemum, any more than he should cast aside the spear forever."



Steam rose softly from the plain earthenware kettle towards the roof of the tearoom. Seven men—Okimoto and his six best students—knelt around it, with their weapons laid aside and the paraphernalia of the tea ceremony before them. Three of the walls were open onto a small formal garden in the ancient Japanese

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style, their panels removed so that the tea-drinkers could gaze on the careful asymmetries of the scene outside. Sunlight gleamed on raked gravel, bonsai trees, and a small pool where carp circled beneath the glinting surface.

Okimoto was aware of the vast antiquity of the gestures he was making as he took the kettle from the fire and tipped hot water into the tea bowl. It was as if panoramas of time lay behind each simple movement—that each motion was the continuation of something as timeless and elemental as sea or sky. Holding the *raku* bowl with a piece of brocade cloth, the *dojo*'s master added green tea, then used a whisk to mix the drink thoroughly. Takuji was the *shokyaku*, or guest of honor, and so the bowl was passed to him first. He sipped from it, wiped it carefully, and then passed it on to the next student in the circle.

Boredom squatted on Yoshitora's soul like some gray-skinned demon crouching in the autumn dusk. The ritual, which seemed to soothe the emotions of his fellow students, was tiresome and antiquated in his eyes. He had great respect for Okimoto, but he could not understand his *sensei*'s dedication to spending hours slowly sipping tea, nor endure the tame conversation that the ceremony imposed.

Yoshitora's idea of an enjoyable time involved hot *sake* and at least one geisha, perhaps with a fight thrown in for variety. He prayed fervently to the Amida Butsu that there would be some interruption to rescue him from the full completion of the ceremony. From the look on his master's face, he guessed that the tea would be passed around until noon or perhaps longer.

Yoshitora endured the ritual for nearly an hour before his earnestly desired respite came. He was just beginning to think that he would doze off, despite his attempt to maintain a look of polite interest, when one of the newer students came hurrying across the garden to bow low at the edge of the tea room.

Okimoto glanced up with his face already assuming a look of cold annoyance. Interrupting the tea ceremony for anything except the most dire emergency was an indiscretion not easily forgiven. It was meant to be a time to calm minds and bodies stretched to the snapping point by the incessant drive to excel.

"What is it, Miyawara?" he asked.

"Honored *sensei*," Miyawara said, "forgive my clumsy intrusion. But a messenger has arrived with a letter of the utmost urgency."

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"Indeed?" Okimoto asked in a calm but hard-edged voice. "And who is it from, then?"

"From an emissary of the revered Kurita, *sensei*," the student answered, remaining on his knees with his head lowered humbly. He was clearly aware of the gravity of intruding on this special ceremony. "He has arrived today and wishes the assistance of our *dojo* in a matter of the deepest urgency."

Yoshitora felt his blood quicken, and could scarcely keep a smile off his face. Routine had been growing to a dull burden, like a leaden yoke around his heart. If this matter were indeed important enough to merit interrupting Okimoto's tea, then surely some kind of action was not far off. Just getting outside the *dojo* for a while would be refreshing change. He listened attentively to the conversation, barely able to contain his excitement.

"Well, it sounds important enough," Okimoto allowed, finally setting down the tea bowl and sighing. "Very well, Miyawara. Were you given a verbal message only, or were you entrusted with a letter?"

"With a letter, *sensei*." The student reached into his *obi*—the broad sash that girded his kimono—and produced a square of red silk folded around a small, flat object. He passed this to Okimoto, who took the packet, removed the silk, unfolded the letter inside, and read it with an expressionless face.

"Thank you, Miyawara," Okimoto said. "You may go."

Yoshitora knew from this that the message had, indeed, been important enough to override the protocol of tea. If Miyawara had been wrong to interrupt, then he would have been dismissed without thanks to await a private tongue-lashing later. He could barely contain his eagerness as Okimoto looked around the select group of students gathered around the kettle. A slight smile tugged at the *sensei* Okimoto's mouth as he surveyed Yoshitora for a moment. Yoshitora received the impression that Okimoto guessed how bored he was.

"It seems that our humble *dojo* has been honored with a task from the noble Dragon himself," Okimoto announced. ""Needless to say, it is to go no further that he has assigned us this mission. To all outside this *dojo*, we are simply volunteering our services to a fellow Kuritan. This is because our own status is dubious in the eyes of the Star League, and we do not want to create difficulties for the Dragon."

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He paused for a moment to allow his students to fully absorb his words, and then continued.

"The emissary who has arrived on this planet—to speak with certain members of the Star League about the future of the Kuritan military—bears the honorable name Kobota. He requires protection during his stay on this planet, as does his wife, Hisa, who accompanies him.

"His negotiations are of a delicate nature, and there are political interests which would be served by his elimination or by taking his wife hostage. It is even possible that the Star League itself might attempt coercion or assassination, depending on how the negotiations proceed. Accordingly, I am choosing my two best students, Kawana Takauji and Shimobu Yoshitora, to carry out this task. When the emissary and his wife are together, then you will assist one another in guarding them. When they are apart, Takauji will guard the emissary, and Yoshitora will guard his wife. You may choose any two of the *dojo*'s 'Mechs to pilot while carrying out this mission. You will leave immediately to the address given in this letter. May the Amida Butsu watch over you."

Takauji and Yoshitora bowed low before their *sensei* and rose to leave the room. Behind them, Okimoto added fresh water to the kettle and reached for his tea bowl once again, as serene as though the interruption had never been.



Yoshitora awakened with his face against stone and vertigo reeling in his brain. His stomach was heaving and his body was cramped and sore from lying on a hard surface too long. With an effort, he raised his head and looked at the base of a brick wall with a few weeds growing in a crevice at its base.

What has happened to me? he thought.

But the memory of what had happened to him had already come down upon his mind with the crashing finality of a katana stroke. He knew fully what had occurred, and how he had failed, even if the sequence of events and the exact details still swam in and out of a dream-like vagueness that was slow to pass.

What am I going to tell the sensei? he asked himself, rolling over onto his back and propping himself on his elbows—a process that took a full five minutes to complete. His body felt numb, but sen-

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sation and motion were slowly returning to it, and the dizziness was ebbing from his skull. He still felt like vomiting, however.

Yoshitora edged over to the wall and, leaning heavily on it, dragged himself upright. The ground seemed to be shifting and uncertain under his feet. A glance around told the young warrior that he was, indeed, in the alley beside the tavern he had entered some time before. He recognized the street beyond its mouth with its neat rows of small, straight trees in stone planters. It was full night now, of course, but the scene was brightly lit and this light flooded down the alley to illuminate his wide, anxious face.

The shame of this! The shame! he thought in despair. But maybe the worst didn't happen after all. Perhaps she is still safe.

Yoshitora knew the wish was hollow. He and Takuji had met the Kuritan envoy earlier that day—a small, plump, energetic man with a genial smile and hard, shrewd eyes that belied his outward cordiality. He had somewhat shocked them both by coming forward to shake their hands, rather than accepting their formal bows while seated. Takuji had then carefully explained how they were simply two private volunteers from the *dojo* who had heard of the envoy's coming and had decided to help a fellow Kuritan who might be in danger. Yoshitora had stood by, faintly bemused by the smooth lies which his colleague told, while wondering if Kobota Hisa was pretty and lively. He had hoped that she was, since it would make guarding her more interesting and pleasant.

As it turned out, Lady Kobota was a dry, stone-faced woman who had none of the easy charm of her husband. She treated her protectors with cold civility, and Yoshitora had thought, with an inward shrug, that at least he would not be tempted to get in trouble with an important man's wife. The two warriors had, of course, left their 'Mechs on the outskirts of the city in the care of a reliable technician. So Yoshitora had spent his day accompanying Lady Kobota and her maid on foot or in ground cars as they explored the city and bought things. It had almost been as bad as the tea ceremony.

Finally, Lady Kobota had gone into a shopping complex that sold many different types of clothing, telling Yoshitora to wait outside. Evidently, she thought him capable of trying to peer into her dressing room when she was trying on a new fashions. Yoshitora wondered vaguely if the envoy had a mistress to make up for the shortcomings of his matrimonial life.

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Yoshitora had been lingering on the pavement when a cheerful young man in a Star League uniform approached him. Hailing him, the broadly-grinning man had suggested that they drink some *sake* together in the Japanese-style tavern across the street. He hated to see anyone looking so bored and dissatisfied, the man had said, and Yoshitora had succumbed to the offer without much persuasion.

I can remember drinking two cups of sake, Yoshitora thought as he stepped away from the wall, tottered, and steadied himself. The second one must have been drugged. Unless I'm just a weakling who suddenly can't hold his sake. That Star League bastard! If I see him again I'll chop his head off for him.

Yoshitora stumbled to the end of the alley and looked out. It was late at night, for the lights blazed on vacant pavements and no one was around. The nearest ground car was two or three streets away. The ground car which Lady Kobota had rented and ordered him to drive was still parked across the way. It appeared to be empty, but Yoshitora had to start somewhere.

It was only when he stood beside it, leaning a hand against the cold metal of its roof-edge, that Yoshitora realized that it was not empty. Kobota Hisa's maid lay on its back seat, her unblinking eyes staring back at Yoshitora with an expression of eternal astonishment.

Yoshitora had seen corpses before, and even made a few when the occasion called for it, so the maid's dead presence did not, in itself, horrify him very much. But the sight of her made him realize that everything he had guessed had gone wrong had indeed gone wrong, and that it was largely his fault. That realization was like a cold steel fist squeezing shut around his heart. Even as he mumbled a prayer to the Buddha for the girl's soul, his mind was racing.

The Star League! he thought. That bastard was in a Star League uniform! They want to make the envoy accept their terms, so they grabbed his wife! She's probably about as interesting as five-day-old rice to be around, but he may listen to their demands to save her. Or just to save his face and honor. And I was the one who let them do it!

Despite his sickness, Yoshitora swung into the ground car's driver seat. A moment later, the vehicle was hurtling through the dark in the direction of the Okimoto school's *dojo*. Its lights reached out ahead of it over the empty road like the probing phosphores-

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cent antennae of some demonic beetle, but the stark ashen hues they revealed were not so bleak as the thoughts of Yoshitora as he drove to report his failure.



"We shouldn't just sit here shouting!" one of the students roared, brandishing his fist as he stamped up and down the *dojo*'s main hall. "We should go kill some of those Star League pigs and free Lady Kobota!"

"Take hostages in turn!" one of the other young men expostulated, smacking a meaty fist into his palm. "They'll let her go quick enough if we threaten to send them the heads of some of their officers."

The *dojo* was in an uproar. The students—including Yoshitora—had worked themselves into a fury over the kidnapping and were calling loudly for Star League blood. The fact that few of them had gotten more than a few hours of sleep did nothing to calm their rampant fury. Dozens of plans had been offered, ranging from an all-out attack on every Star League building and person who could be found to hostage-taking and selective raids to free the envoy's abducted wife.

In the midst of all this uproar, Okimoto sat cross-legged on a *tatami* with his hands resting on his knees. His face was bland and mild, although he appeared to be alert to what was going on around him and his eyes were keen. He had not yet said anything to check the outbursts of his students.

Presently, a deputation of students approached Okimoto with Yoshitora at their head. Most were breathing hard, in contrast to the placid poise of their teacher. Okimoto looked them over thoughtfully, but remained silent.

"Honorable *sensei*," Yoshitora began, "we have come to humbly request that you choose what way we shall attack the Star League, and lead us against them. We are ready and willing, sir. The longer we wait, the greater grows the burden of our shame. Choose who shall accompany you, and we swear by our honor in *bushido* that we shall make them regret this insult to the Dragon."

Okimoto sat silently for several minutes while the deputation fidgeted and scowled with suppressed belligerence. Just when Yoshitora thought that Okimoto intended to make no answer at all, his *sensei* spoke in a quiet, reasonable tone.

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"And what, noble pupils," Okimoto asked, "makes you believe that the Star League has kidnapped Lady Kobota?"

The deputation was silent, so Okimoto went on. "A golden-haired man in a Star League uniform drugged your *sake*, Yoshitora," he said. "Your blood samples confirms that you were indeed drugged. That much is true. But why should a man wearing a Star League uniform be sent to drug you if the Star League meant to take Lady Kobota? Is it not a little too obvious for even such crude barbarians? They are still capable of thought, and it would have taken only a moment for the man to change his uniform for civilian garb."

"Perhaps he made an error, honored *sensei*," Yoshitora suggested.

"Perhaps," Okimoto said. "Fuwari, will you bring me some rice and fish? I have not yet eaten. But, Yoshitora, no maze of the material world is so complex as the labyrinth that lies within the human heart. You make the plot too simple. It may indeed be the Star League who took Lady Kobota. But the uniform alone is not grounds enough to destroy our *dojo* over. And make no error: if we attack the Star League, then even if we prevail for the moment, we will die. Divisions of their army will hunt us as men hunt mad tigers."

"If Lady Kobota has been taken by the Star League, then honor demands that we rescue her, even if we die," Yoshitora responded.

"That is also so," Okimoto said. He took the bowl of rice and fish that one of the students had brought to him and began to eat with relish. "Death is a small price to pay if by dying a samurai can preserve his honor. Yet it is worse to die like a fool, assailing the wrong foe, while your true adversary laughs from safety."

Okimoto ate several more unhurried mouthfuls of rice before he continued.

"The death of the maid also suggests that the Star League was not involved," he said. "It would only be necessary to kill her if there were very few kidnappers involved, perhaps as few as two or three. Yet we know that the Star League commands great resources. Why not send enough operatives to take both the Lady and her maid, and thus avoid the possibility that someone would witness the murder and raise an alarm it would not be easy to quell? The only answer is that those who carried out the abduction have far less resources."

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"Further, the kidnappers did not take your ground car. They needed somewhere to put the body, and they did not have the political connections to ensure that the car would not be searched if they were stopped. At the moment, we do not know enough to be certain where the Lady is. A warrior must see his enemy's neck before he swings his sword, or he may instead cut down his own brother in error. Tell me, Yoshitora—can you remember nothing else?"

"I can remember nothing, honored *sensei*," Yoshitora said, his mood somewhat sobered by his teacher's lucid words. "Unless... yes, I do remember something, but it is a thing that does not help. I can only recall smelling a fruit—a pear. Beyond that, there is only blankness."

"It seems unimportant," Okimoto said, "yet the gnawing of the rice rat can fell the castle wall in time. It is my intention to seek the help of the Kikuhoshi *dojo*."

"Are you certain they will aid us?" Yoshitora queried dubiously. "They have little love for us, *sensei*. They fear that the renown of your school will eclipse that of theirs."

"They will not aid *us*," Okimoto said, "but they *will* act to preserve the honor of the Dragon. And it is better if our swords are drawn together against this unknown foe."

Yoshitora stood with his head bowed, then blurted out,

"*Sensei*, I have failed you and the *dojo* miserably."

Okimoto studied the young man before him, noting the anguish in the warrior's features and the defeat in every line of his body. He knew that Yoshitora probably did not have the true dedication to actually kill himself—he was a good man, a brave and loyal student, but he also loved life too much to cut his own belly. Instead, the young samurai would probably flee to live in shame and misery in some menial job, drinking to blot out his own thoughts, the butt of mockery from those who did not follow the Way of the Bow and Spear. But Okimoto's agile mind quickly found a solution, which would leave Yoshitora alive and still able to use his considerable skills and courage in the school's service.

"You are my student, Yoshitora," he said quietly, "and until I have made you a master in this *dojo*, any failure is not yours, but mine. I absolve you of all guilt in this—the shame is mine, as your guide and teacher. If we cannot rescue Lady Kobota, I will myself cut my belly. For you to atone, it is only necessary to fight with all the

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fierceness of a true samurai when we discover the kidnappers at last."



Okimoto guided his 'Mech over the landscape with the fluid ease of long practice. The *Guillotine*'s ovoid bulk felt like an extension of his own limbs, comfortable, poised, and strong. Ahead, amid low, forested hills, the roofs of the Kikuhoshi *dojo* came into view, gleaming softly under the noon sun.

Kikuhoshi had founded his *dojo* only months after Okimoto had founded his. The older MechWarrior had detested Okimoto from the first, feeling that the renown of his rival was undeserved and drew many students away from his own, superior school of 'Mech fighting and *bushido*. Okimoto believed that his rival's suspicions were accurate; but he was not about to give up his own *dojo* merely to allow Kikuhoshi to recruit the better students. It was true that Kikuhoshi's students, though considerably more numerous than Okimoto's, were also far less skilled in the main.

The gate of the Kikuhoshi *dojo* was made in the ancient form of a Japanese castle or temple gate, although it was high enough to allow the passage of BattleMechs. Okimoto's *Guillotine* strode through it, making the painted wooden arch tremble. Okimoto brought the war machine to a halt beside a gantry which had been built just inside the gate, and dismounted from his 'Mech, as courtesy demanded. Four students had emerged from the *dojo*'s main hall to see who had just arrived, and when they saw Okimoto's ceremonial kimono and the two swords through his belt, they hurried forward to bow deeply.

Their faces were blandly expressionless. "Honored Nagamaru Okimoto," their spokesman, a hard-faced youth with cruel eyes said, "welcome to our humble *dojo*. Truly, we are blessed by the Amida Butsu to have the opportunity to extend our hospitality to so noble a guest."

Okimoto detected a note of scorn and hatred beneath the flowery salutation. He did not resent it, but he did examine the youth with some interest. This was, he guessed, Kikuhoshi's head student and right-hand man, Noriwaza. Noriwaza was noted for his brutality and savagery even in the harsh world of the *dojo*. It was said that he had once crushed a competitor for his favored status under a 'Mech's foot, and that he simply killed or maimed any

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students whom he disliked during training, relying on his importance in the *dojo* to protect him from his *sensei*'s wrath. Looking into the cold, sharp eyes of the young man, and noting the tense, unreasoning belligerence of his face, Okimoto could believe the stories easily.

"Thank you," Okimoto said mildly. "The courtesy of your welcome is like the blooming of many cherry blossoms in spring. Please tell the esteemed Kikuhoshi of my coming, present my respectful greetings to him, and tell him that I wish to speak to him about a matter of the greatest urgency."

"He is even now in the main hall of the *dojo*, sir," one of the other students responded. "We can take you there immediately, if you wish."

The four students conducted Okimoto to the *dojo*'s principal building and ushered him in through the double doors, which stood open to admit the daylight and fresh air. Okimoto found Kikuhoshi seated on the *tatami* there, with the school's trainee warriors coming and going around him on the many errands of a working *dojo*. Kikuhoshi was a lean old man with snowy hair flowing down his back and a wispy beard on his gaunt chin, but when he rose to greet Okimoto he was still taller than his rival. The two *senseis* bowed gravely to each other. Kikuhoshi's movements were still fluid, easy, and graceful despite his age. Okimoto knew that, behind the controls of a 'Mech, Kikuhoshi was a deadly opponent against whom few indeed could have any hope in single combat.

"You are very welcome here, noble Okimoto," the older warrior said. "Please, accept my welcome as well as that of my students. It is too seldom that our *dojo* is enlightened by your presence."

"You are too kind to a simple follower of the Way," Okimoto responded, bowing again. "We are all students seeking the perfection which even the great Miyamoto Musashi was unable to attain." Okimoto sat, and the two men faced each other across a few meters of plain mats, while Noriwaza stood glowering behind his master. Okimoto wasted no time, but explained what had happened the day before and the repercussions that the abduction might have on the future of the Kurita. Kikuhoshi listened attentively, his face alert but calm, while his foremost student glared at the unwelcome visitor with a sneer.

"And so you wish our aid in finding Lady Kobota?" Kikuhoshi asked. "It may not be easy to find her, Okimoto; at least not until it is too late."

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"That is so," Okimoto responded. "But if both our *dojos* turn their energies to finding her, then it is surely more likely that we will succeed, and the honor of the Dragon be preserved. Two hands are more certain than one to find a rice grain in darkness."

"Is it not clear, *sensei*," said Noriwaza, unable to contain himself any longer, "that the Star League has stolen this woman? Surely it is Okimoto's only course to attack them, and thus either rescue her, or wash away the shame of his student's failure with his own blood. What other choice is open to a true samurai?"

"So it might seem," Kikuhoshi responded, "but we will let the noble Okimoto choose his own way in this matter. I have no doubt that he will choose the path of honor."

"So will you help us, then?" Okimoto inquired. His voice was carefully indifferent, as though he were asking what color of *kimono* his rival intended to wear the next day.

Before Kikuhoshi could respond, there was a commotion near one of the doors, and a younger student came hurrying in. He bowed low to Kikuhoshi. The old man turned his white-maned head to regard him.

"*Sensei*," the man exclaimed, "ill news. Ichiro was cleaning your ancestral *katana* and dropped it, cutting his arm, and now there is blood on that cherished blade. What is to be done to preserve this heirloom of your house?"

"Use a pear to clean it," Kikuhoshi responded. "Its juices will remove the blood without rusting the steel. Just as we do with all our blades when they are bloodied."

"As you will, *sensei*," the student replied, and hastened from the chamber.

"Forgive the interruption," Kikuhoshi told his guest. "These young fellows know how much I value the heirlooms of my forefathers, and are eager to preserve them even at the cost of etiquette. But, yes, we will help you in every way we can. I will send out my students to learn what they can, and if the kidnapper is discovered, we will stand beside you even if the full might of the Star League comes against us for it."

"I thank you, not for my own unworthy sake, but for the honor of the Dragon," Okimoto said, smiling. He wrote a note and folded it carefully, placing it behind his sash. "And now, I must beg that you forgive my breach of courtesy as well. Though I would like

to remain and do proper honor to your hospitality, I must return to my *dojo* before my students act in haste. But it has been most instructive speaking with you, honored colleague; and I welcome the aid of you and your school."



"That bastard!" Noriwaza snarled as soon as the figure of Okimoto had vanished from the doorway. "Sensei, you should have killed him. Or let me kill him. I would have decorated the mats with his entrails in a moment if you had given the word. Coming here to whine for help after he spits in our faces all these years!"

Kikuhoshi did not respond to his student's outburst. He was looking at a small square of paper which rested on the *tatami* where Okimoto had been sitting. With a strange expression on his face, he rose and retrieved the folded piece of rice paper. His hand was steady as he unfolded it, though doubt darkened his eyes. Inside, there were the three terse lines of a *haiku* poem.

*Even pears' fragrance
Can reveal the cruel darkness
Of the plotter's heart.*

"Prepare the 'Mechs!" Kikuhoshi shouted. "Ready yourselves for battle! That snake Okimoto has guessed that we have Lady Kobota prisoner! Damn Jiro for cleaning his knife with a pear after killing the Lady's maid. Well, it is too late for regret. Now there is only battle and death."



"Sensei," Takauji's voice crackled over the *Guillotine*'s comm., "there is a ground car approaching."

Okimoto glanced around and saw that there was indeed a ground car drawing near along the road leading to the *dojo*. The road was unpaved, and a faint swirl of dust wreathed up in the vehicle's wake to hang in the air for a moment before the light breeze diffused it into nothingness.

The nine BattleMech pilots watched in silence as the vehicle came to a halt a short distance away. The car's door opened and a figure climbed out. The newcomer wore the two swords and for-

BATTLECORPS

mal kimono of a samurai. He walked forward several meters and made a deep, ceremonial bow.

“I am called Jiro,” he shouted towards the group of motionless steel giants that loomed before him.

“I have come to bring the final greetings of my master, Kikuhoshi.

“In the ground car behind me is Lady Kobota Hisa. It was I and another of the students who abducted her; and it was I who killed her maid and made the error of cleaning my knife with a pear, thus failing my *dojo* through my unpardonable stupidity. It was intended that you blame the Star League for her abduction, attack them, and be destroyed, thus removing a rival to our school.

“Lord Kikuhoshi has instructed me to convey his apologies to you and your students for this dishonorable trick. He understands that this will not turn aside your attack, and begs the courtesy of death from you. His ‘Mechs will await yours in the hills outside the Kikuhoshi *dojo*.

“And finally, I have my own apology to make to the Kikuhoshi school. It is through my ignorant blundering that the plans of my honored *sensei* have been frustrated. Therefore, I make this *haiku*:

*“Yet still I can hear
Through the BattleMechs’ thunder
The cuckoo’s singing.”*

The man drew his *wakizashi* from its sheath, knelt, and drove the blade deep into his belly. Okimoto watched from his cockpit as the solitary figure quivered, a deep red stain spreading on his kimono-front.

How like a peony the blood looks, Okimoto thought. His mind was full of solemn admiration for the artistry of the man’s apology. Here was one who understood that the manner of a samurai’s death was as important as that of his life. Jiro had ascended beyond the shame and squalor of his failure to a triumph that only a devotee of *bushido* could duly appreciate.

Jiro’s body jerked spasmodically, then slid sideways to tilt into the dust. Okimoto could not see the face, but he was certain that of the six expressions of death, it bore the most serene—the Face of the Buddha. The words of Jiro’s final *haiku* rang in his mind like

BATTLECORPS

the haunting chords of a *koto* played at dusk. How correct it was that even above the savage din of battle, the true warrior could hear the voice of the cuckoo—the bird whose name, in Japanese, also meant “the bird of the other world.”

May he come to the White Jade Pavilion, Okimoto thought. *But for now, it is time to send others to that place as well.*

“My students, are you ready?” Okimoto asked.

“We are, *sensei*,” the disembodied voice of Yoshitora replied.

“Then,” Okimoto said quietly, “let us fill their ears with the song of the Bird of the Other World.”



The nine MechWarriors of the Okimoto school spoke little as they drew near to the place where they knew the Kikuhoshi school awaited them. Honor demanded that they kill their rivals, or die in the attempt, and the solemnity of ancient ritual lay upon their minds. To these men, instilled with the samurai spirit that the Kurita had revived, their willingness to live or die was itself a supreme aesthetic achievement, a poem written in the chronicles of fate in letters of courage, blood, and steel.

*For a moment only
A man lives—yet, in that moment,
The katana's brightness.*

Okimoto had taken a moment to write his own *haiku* on a slip of rice paper, and attached it to the control panel of his *Guillotine*'s cockpit. Its concise geometry, expressing such complex veils of thought and emotion in such a brief span, suited his mood perfectly. Warnings shrilled as the magnetic anomaly detectors of Okimoto's 'Mech suddenly detected the mass of several BattleMechs ahead. The warriors of his school immediately fanned out, spreading their formation smoothly and swiftly even as they continued their advance.

They had emerged on the lip of a gentle valley with a winding silver stream at the bottom. Across from them, a tree-cloaked shoulder of land rose against the sky, punctuated here and there with massive shelves of rock projecting horizontally from the incline. The enemy was there, hidden only by a mask of leaves. Weapons fire began to stab out at the advancing 'Mechs, erupting from the thick spring boughs. Here and there, the treetops heaved

and rippled as huge metallic bodies thrust against the trunks in their passage through the woods.

The lower torso of Okimoto's 'Mech glared with bitter light for a moment as a large laser struck it, and armor spouted away in liquid runnels and steam. Okimoto lunged left, his own lasers slashing at the nearest adversary whom his sensors revealed. A ripple of missiles streamed from the opposite hillcrest to tear up brown eruptions of earth and spatter Takauji's *Champion* with explosions.

Yoshitora, his mind still full of the humiliation that these men had inflicted on him, fought with savage doggedness on the left flank of the Okimoto school's line. The Kikuhoshi 'Mechs opposite his own were mostly of medium weight, as their anomalies revealed. There were at least two missile-armed BattleMechs supporting them, however. Again and again, savage sheets of fire and earth erupted around Yoshitora and his fellows as the missile barrages shrieked down from the heights. The shock of impacts jarred Yoshitora's *Lancelot*, pocking its obdurate armor with smoking pits and cracks.

Time became an everlasting, violent instant for Yoshitora. He and the two 'Mechs accompanying him used the heaped boulders at the valley bottom as cover. Dislodged by the frost-heaves of long past winters, these great stones had rolled to the valley floor and now stood singly or in clusters between the slope and the stream-bank. Many were huge enough for a crouching 'Mech to shelter behind, and the Okimoto warriors used them to the full, dashing from cover to cover, emerging to fire before lunging back to allow missiles and laser fire to splinter on the ancient granite. One boulder, its structure overstrained by the vicious heat of a laser shot, burst from within, splintering outwards in great chunks to reveal Yoshitora's *Lancelot* behind it. But the 'Mech was already in motion, and Yoshitora reached new cover even as lasers snipped at the hurtling mass of his war machine.

Sweat poured from Yoshitora's face and body in the furnace-hot cockpit. But his own discomfort did not trouble him—it was only a vague presence at the edges of his mind. His soul was focused utterly on the driving, hammering purpose of overcoming the foe, destroying them, searing away the shame of his failure with burnt steel and blood.

Each shot of his lasers was aimed with a ferocious precision, each lunging motion of his 'Mech a reflection of the concentrated flame of his own purposes.

Hours passed as the struggle continued. The metal giants were slashed everywhere with combat's scars. Neither side was willing to yield to the other. Every warrior fought with grim tenacity, determined to show himself an exemplar of *bushido* and to send his foe hurtling to the ground in ruin, never again to rise. Armor split and melted under the endless strobing of lasers and bursting of missiles. Great limbs were torn away amid showers of sparks and burning shreds of myomer. The earth itself was cratered by missiles and seared by savage energies. Neither side seemed to be winning; the Kokihoshi were more numerous, the Okimoto more skilled, and both utterly determined to prevail, whatever the cost to their mortal flesh.

At last, Yoshitora fired his lasers again at the enemy *Archer* he had been sniping at each time it emerged from its hillcrest cover. Its armor had been pitted and distorted by the blasts that had struck it, but it had continued to shower the valley with missiles. Now, the bright stab of Yoshitora's beam striking home was lost in a greater flash. The *Archer* erupted into a globe of smoke and fire, and a puncturing crash, louder than the noise of battle, sprang across the valley to echo back thunderously from the far slope. Dark fragments leapt into the sky. The woods around the annihilated 'Mech smoldered for a moment, then gushed with flames that were lost a heartbeat later in a welter of funereal smoke. Yoshitora and his two comrades moved forward immediately, their scarred machines plunging through the stream and into the trees on the other side. A medium 'Mech, limping on crippled legs, tried to move aside, but Yoshitora shattered its maimed limbs with a ferocious kick, then blasted its cockpit to a molten crater at point-blank range and pushed on. The shattered trunks of trees, many of them charred and smoking, snapped and rolled under his *Lancelot*'s feet.

Excitement filled Yoshitora as his 'Mech clambered up the slope. A *Kintaro* KTO-18, its metal shell rent here and there with wounds at whose edges fire flickered, dashed from a stand of intact trees and launched a salvo of SRMs at Yoshitora's 'Mech. The machine reeled under the impact. There was a rending lurch, and Yoshitora saw pieces of his *Lancelot*'s left leg spray away to the right. The 'Mech lurched, swaying, then toppled over with a crash, slamming the young MechWarrior violently against his ejection seat's restraining straps.

Yoshitora cursed and wrenched at his controls, trying to prop the 'Mech on its arms so that he could balance it on one leg again. The *Kintaro* was already staggering back under a vicious fusillade

from Yoshitora's two companions. Its pilot managed to fire one more salvo of SRMs from one launcher before an autocannon shot plunged through a gap in its armor to shatter the inner workings of its engine. The pilot's ejection seat sprang from the machine's cockpit. Yoshitora, his maimed BattleMech still crouching where it had fallen, fired one arm-mounted laser to snip the man out of reality in a puff of steam and smoke. The intent was, after all, to exterminate the Kikuhoshi school, root and branch. How else could honor be restored?

With Yoshitora's companions on their flank, and their missile support 'Mech destroyed, the battle turned swiftly against the Kikuhoshi warriors. When they sought shelter from the 'Mechs sailing them from below, they were left open to the attacks of the three fierce samurai on their flank. Soon, the hillside was littered with crippled 'Mechs, and the six remaining war machines of the Okimoto school strode among the broken trees, hunting the pilots and blasting them to ash.



Smoke hung above the rooftops of the Kikuhoshi *dojo*, looming against the sunset like the wings of a mighty dragon. Yoshitora and Okimoto stood together outside the building, listening to the steady roaring of the flames and the cracks and crashings of collapse that came from deep within the structure. Takuji lay on a stretcher beside them, for both his legs had been broken when he ejected from his fallen 'Mech earlier in the day. Kikuhoshi had been the last to fall, and though he had ejected from his ruined 'Mech, the Okimoto warriors had stood courteously aside as he wrote a final *haiku* on his war-fan and then ended his own life.

"And so, honored *sensei*, ends an attempt to destroy both our lives and our reputation," Yoshitora said. "It is a great honor for the *dojo* you have founded, sir."

"And yet," Okimoto mused, the glare of the fire illuminating his tranquil features, "is there not a victory even in their defeat? Dishonorable though their trick may have been, they asked for no mercy from us or from fate. They were not weaklings, surely. There is a lesson also to be learnt from their deaths, noble pupil. Even a thing as humble as a pear can bring a man to destruction if he forgets his honor for the sake of feeding his pride. The Kikuhoshi warriors are our teachers, and let us honor them for that."

BATTLECORPS

Nagamaru Okimoto bowed deeply once towards the burning *dojo* in respect, then turned away towards a new day in which honor would bloom again for his own school, as a chrysanthemum opens its petals to welcome the next rising of the sun.