

OF WAR AND PEACE AND CHERRY TREES

Part II

By Steven Mohan, Jr.

**Main Commercial Arterial, Outskirts of Newport,
Richmond
Pesht Military District
Draconis Combine
17 November 3062**

The fire roared like some great beast as it swallowed trees whole, consuming everything in its path with a ravenous hunger that could never be sated. Powerful, swirling winds buffeted Shintaro Yamada's 'Mech as cooler air rushed in to replace the superheated air lost to the immense up-draft. The beast breathed.

And it spread.

Angry winds blew burning branches, needles and cones from tree to tree, feeding a crown fire that raced through the forest's canopy. All around Yamada's *Atlas* the world was orange-yellow flame and towering heat.

It was easy to believe he'd descended into Hell.

He stepped forward to finish the crippled *Kodiak* with his arm-mounted lasers when a hail of missiles impacted his right side, knocking him off stride. He pivoted to find himself face-to-face with a *Dragonfly*.

This lightweight 'Mech, called a *Viper* by the Clans, was fast but lightly armored. *Dragonflies* typically darted in to harass bigger, slower opponents and then dashed away before the opposing 'Mech could land a crushing blow.

This one stood its ground.

Long enough for Yamada's *Atlas* to complete its deadly turn and line up its hip rifle perfectly.

The *Dragonfly* just stood there firing its pulse lasers into the heavily armored *Atlas*'s torso.



Yamada triggered the Gauss rifle and the weapon's powerful magnetic fields instantly accelerated the 125-kilo slug up to supersonic speed. The *Dragonfly's* pilot never had a chance. The slug smashed into the smaller 'Mech's cockpit and out the other side.

That was enough for the *Kodiak*.

The huge garrison 'Mech turned and bolted, hitting its jump jets in a maneuver that sent it fleeing in a series of great, bounding leaps. The Star Colonel who piloted the *Kodiak* must've sounded a general retreat because an instant later the Clan *Nova* leapt high above the trees, still joined to *Chu-i Xia's Black Hawk* by a line of ruby fire.

Yamada centered his sights on the fleeing *Nova*. A tone sounded in his ear and he loosed a flight of short-range missiles.

They caught the *Nova* mid-jump. The multiple explosions weren't enough to destroy the 'Mech, but they were enough to knock it off-balance. The *Nova* pilot came down in the center of the opening in the forest. On one leg. There was no way the limb could take that kind of impact. For an instant the shriek of rended metal pierced the fire's roar. Then the leg snapped off and gravity pulled the damaged 'Mech down. The ground shook and groaned with the great impact.

"I'll finish the *Nova*," signaled Yamada. "Xia and Lee, take down the Elementals. Go."

Lee's *Bishamon* skittered across the uneven ground, racing for the highway. The other two 'Mechs were faster than Yamada's *Atlas*. They'd have a better chance of catching the Elementals before they could withdraw.

Yamada stalked his 'Mech over to what was left of the *Nova*. The great machine lay face-up in a bed of shattered ferrocrete. Then its head turned and the *Nova* struggled to rise.

Yamada jerked his right arm up and poured megajoules of killing energy into the *Nova's* cockpit.

The 'Mech fell back, its cockpit a mess of blackened and twisted metal.

Yamada stared down at the wreckage. His hands shook. He had acted on instinct. That instinct had probably saved his life, but he'd killed a man who might've been merely captured.

He drew a deep, shuddering breath and stepped his 'Mech into a fast walk.

He couldn't think about it or he'd never get through this. Just act and react. That was all he could do. Act and react.

"We have engaged Elementals," said Xia's voice over the 'Mech circuit.

"I'm proceeding to your position," answered Yamada.

Clan Ghost Bear had fielded maybe two, three Points of infantry in their effort to take the bridge. That meant as many as fifteen Elementals against two 'Mech's, a clear mismatch. Xia and Lee could handle it themselves, but Yamada would not send children to do what he would not do.

Yamada raced down the highway between walls of flame fifteen meters high, the roar of the fire drowning out all other sound. Above him the sky was low, fashioned from roiling black smoke. He charged past the burning timber and into the clearing that had been cut around the bridge's entrance.

The Clan Elementals were pinned down on the bridge.

No doubt they had planned to fade into the forest if something went wrong, but the angry inferno tearing through the trees had cut off that escape, leaving them with few options. They could engage two (now three) 'Mechs head on, which was suicide. They could turn and flee along the bridge and get shot in the back. Or they could use their jump jets to scatter and hope that some of them made it.

Being Clan warriors, they chose to stand and fight.

By Yamada's quick count there were fourteen Elementals up and six down. (So four points, then.) Clan Elementals were the pinnacle of infantry development, genetically engineered monsters more than two meters tall and encased in heavy battle armor that made for a ton of man and machine. But there was no way they could stand up to the firepower of a BattleMech.

Xia and Lee poured laser fire into the nearest Elementals, melting right through the armor to kill the warrior within.

One of the Elementals stepped forward and fired the dual missile pack he wore on his back. A pair of SRMs streaked toward Yamada's *Atlas*. The missiles hit the *Atlas* in the chest and Yamada staggered back, his chest armor flashing from yellow to red.

"That's enough," he snarled.

He lined up his hip rifle and fired. The Gauss slug instantly smashed the Elemental into bloody pulp.

Yamada charged forward, savagely picking off soldiers with his arm-mounted lasers. The Elementals fell back under his onslaught. One didn't fall back fast enough. Yamada stepped down with his right foot, crushing him under 100 tons of 'Mech.

That was too much, even for Clan Elementals. The surviving infantry broke and ran.

Xia and Lee surged after them.

Yamada took a step forward to join the pursuit and almost toppled over. The crushed Elemental's armor was still stuck to his 'Mech's foot, just thick enough to throw off his balance. He raised his right leg and dragged the bottom of his foot against the concrete barrier at the bridge's side.

It was like scraping dog shit off his shoe.

He peered down at the mess of smashed metal that had once been a person. Suddenly he couldn't do it any more. Yamada turned his back on the 'Mech's chasing down the last of the Elementals and slowly walked away.

***The Castle of Unheard Screams,
Newport, Richmond
Pesht Military District
Draconis Combine
19 November 3062***

The next time Yamada visited his old cell it had a new occupant.

He didn't know it was his old cell at first, but after the guard pushed the door open and he saw the crack in the stone high up on the far wall and the bowed cot with the broken wooden frame, he just *knew*.

They had put the prisoner in his old cell. Just the kind of sick joke that appealed to the beast's perverted sense of humor.

Yamada stepped into the cell and the guard closed the heavy stone door behind him.

The woman sitting on the sagging cot looked up.

She wore prison grays. They were clean and new at least, which was better than Yamada ever had. It would've been better if she'd been in uniform, but when DCMS infantry had pulled her from her crippled *Mad Dog* all she'd been wearing was a pair of shorts and a 'Mech cooling vest.

"You are Birgit," he said.

"*Star Commander* Birgit," she answered tightly.

"I assume you have no Bloodname," said Yamada, "or you would've shouted it at me by now."

She stared at him without speaking.

Yamada could see her body was lithe and trim under the gray jumpsuit. Her brown hair was cut short, but it was still a woman's hair, reaching just below her ears. She might've been pretty if it weren't for ugly black bruise that framed her left eye and the flash burn had transformed the skin of the right side of her face into a mottled pink. "I will not tell you anything," she croaked.

Without looking at her he stepped past the cot and peered out the small window.

It was. It was his old cell.

Her voice called him away from the view of the cherry tree. "I will not betray my Clan."

Yamada affected a sigh. "Such loyalty," he said softly.

He realized he was acting, couching his words to get the desired result. This woman was playing his role, while *he* played the beast. How easily evil reclaims those it has lost. It was not a comfortable thought.

He turned and fixed her with a hard stare. "You think you're better than us."

"Of course we are," snapped the woman. "We are strong and we are civilized. We do not manipulate our enemies. We do not trick them. We meet them openly on a field of honor. *We* do not hide behind *words*."

Yamada nodded. "I see."

"And that is why I will tell you nothing of our plans, our order of battle, our supply situation—"

Yamada waved away her words with an impatient hand. "I don't care about any of those things. I will tell you a secret." He leaned forward and whispered, "I don't need them."

Her eyes widened.

"We launched a feint against your DropShips. When a Star of your 'Mechs rushed back to help we ambushed them and cut them apart."

She clenched her jaw and a muscle pulsed in her cheek.

"There's more," said Yamada. "Your DropShips have grounded on the Derrington Plateau and yet you continue to attack from the east. Clearly you have to be resupplying your forces somehow."

"What did you do?" she whispered.

"A lance of DCMS 'Mechs caught a column of your support and maintenance forces and smashed it."

"B-but they are noncombatants. You *murdered* them."

If she expected him to deny it she was going to be disappointed. "*Hai*," said Yamada coldly. "Every last one of them."

Her head jerked back as if she'd been slapped.

"Are their lives worth any more than the young warriors you so easily send out to die? You in the Clans try to wrap up war in a

pretty little box. As long as you can keep the world on the outside of the box clean and safe, you don't care what bloody horrors you spawn on the inside."

"That is a lie."

"But they have not yet built the box that can hold *war*. As you are about to learn."

"You are a *monster*." The woman's voice shook with emotion.

"Maybe so, but *I* am winning."

"There can be no true victory without honor," she said firmly.

"Really? Now who is hiding behind *words*?"

The blood drained from her face. Yamada let her think about that for a moment.

"Wh-who are you?" she finally asked.

Yamada bowed. "I am the one who defeated you in combat."

A look of disgust twisted her features. "The *Atlas* pilot. You are the *surat* who tricked us." She spat at his feet. "You are no warrior."

Yamada smiled ruefully. "I agree. But so far I have been unable to convince my government of that. Perhaps you can speak to them for me?"

"You have no honor," she snapped.

"There can be no honor in combat," said Yamada. "The idea of honorable battle is the one thing that makes the Clans truly dangerous."

She looked at him for a long moment and then shook her head. "If you did not come to gain information from me, what do you want?"

"To talk about your commander: Star Colonel Christer Hall, Bloodnamed warrior of Clan Ghost Bear."

She shook her head. "He is nothing like you. He is a *true* warrior, a man of unshakable honor."

Yamada offered her a smile that made the skull's grin of his *Atlas* look friendly by comparison. "That's just what I was counting on."

**Kandin Arterial, Outskirts of Newport, Richmond
Pesht Military District
Draconis Combine
19 November 3062**

It took only a single glance at the battlefield to tell Yamada how badly the fight had gone. Despite all his subterfuge, all his clever tricks, Clan Ghost Bear had very nearly broken the back of the Richmond Reserves.

It had been a close thing.

Somehow, *somehow*, Cahill and her band of children had held, had beaten back the Clan assault. But at a terrible, terrible cost.

The fighting had been fierce enough to shatter the reinforced ferrocrete of the southern access. In some places, autocannon fire had abraded the ferrocrete down to its internal steel supports. Errant laser fire had sketched lines of smoky black glass in the sand that bordered the highway and had set patches of grass aflame. But that was not the worst of it.

The worst part was the twisted, blackened wreckage stretched across twenty kilometers of road. An endless column of scorched and broken equipment.

But no bodies.

The battle had been far too fierce to leave behind bodies. The great beast of war had incinerated the fallen, cooked them in their cockpits, their turrets, or their powered armor leaving nothing but charred carbon.

Yamada could taste the truth of that in the sooty grit carried on the wind.

He suddenly felt a presence behind him and knew at once whom it must be. "This," he said without turning, "*this* is war."

"How could you bear to give it up?" asked the beast cheerfully.

"I don't have time for this," said *Tai-i* Deborah Cahill dully. "If we have something to discuss, let's discuss it."

Yamada turned. The beast looked the same (always the same), but not Cahill.

Looking at her made Yamada's heart heavy. Three days of combat had aged her ten years. The heat of a 'Mech's cockpit had matted her honey blond hair to her skull and the soft, smooth skin of her face was now marked by a three-centimeter line of stitches that started at the corner of her left eye and sliced across her cheek. That would leave a scar.

Worst of all her pretty green eyes had hardened into something angry. And afraid.

Yamada knew those eyes had seen horrors they never could've imagined even three days before. He felt pity for her. Cahill was a fool, but she did not deserve to be subjected to the nightmare of war.

No one did.

He glanced at the beast. "I'm going to call Star Colonel Hall and challenge him to a Trial of Possession."

The beast said nothing. Not the slightest emotion flickered across his face.

Cahill frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Yamada met her eyes. "For the city."

"What? That's insane." Cahill looked from Yamada to the beast and back again. "We're winning."

The sweep of Yamada's hand took in the terrible carnage of the battlefield. "Does this look like winning to you?"

"But you beat them at the river and took down their supply chain and—"

"We're fighting a holding action," said Yamada savagely. "Academy cadets can't possibly hold off the Fifth Regulars. We can win today, maybe even tomorrow, but in the end we are going to lose. He knows that." Yamada jerked his head at the beast. "Why do you think he has not spoken?"

Cahill turned toward the beast, her eyes wide with hurt and betrayal.

The beast met her gaze for a second and then turned to Yamada. "What are you going to ask for?"

"Two weeks. That ought to be enough time for your reinforcements to come—if they ever will."

"*Hai*," said the beast. "Two weeks." Then without another word the beast turned and walked off.

Cahill watched him go, her jaw hanging half-open. "My people," she whispered, "they died on this road, for, for..." Her mouth worked, but no more words came out.

"Be careful *Tai-i* Cahill," said Yamada softly. "That way lies treason."

DCMS Command Center, Newport, Richmond
Pesht Military District
Draconis Combine
20 November 3062

Star Colonel Christer Hall, bloodnamed warrior of Clan Ghost Bear didn't look anything like Yamada expected. He had a shock of thick brown hair, warm blue eyes, and a long, aristocratic nose. A patch of scar tissue marked the cheekbone just under his left eye where some laser had come within a hair's breadth of slicing through his features, but except for that flaw he could've been a holoivid star anywhere in the Inner Sphere.

Right now that near-perfect face filled the two-meter screen in the main briefing room. The pretty countenance twisted into something ugly and hateful. "So you are the *stravag* who makes a mockery of the rules of honorable combat."

Yamada stood in front of the screen, his arms folded across his chest. "There is nothing honorable about slaughtering human beings, Star Colonel, whatever you may tell yourself."

That earned him a raised eyebrow from Hall. "So says a *man* who murdered a good portion of my quartermasters."

Yamada glanced over at Cahill and the beast, both of whom sat silently just outside the camera's pick-up. He was playing a dangerous game. It would have been better if the beast were not here, but that was not to be. It had taken all of Yamada's skill to convince the ISF officer to allow him to propose the trial (not to mention *Tai-sa* Schmidt, the planetary commander). More could not be expected.

Yamada shrugged. "We in the Inner Sphere do not love quartermasters any less than warriors."

A muscle pulsed in Hall's cheek as he struggled with his fury. "How can you expect me to meet a man such as you on the field of honor?"

"Funny, Star Commander Birgit had much the same reaction."

Hall's eyes widened, then he locked his emotions down. "So?"

"So. I will tell you what I told her. I have been able to beat you my way. And I will beat you your way. If your defense of honorable combat is anything more than empty words."

The massive image of Hall shook its massive head. "I invite you to try all your dishonorable tricks, *Sho-sa* Yamada. In the end they will mean nothing. We shall still beat you. *That* is how I shall defend the idea of honorable combat."

"*Hai*, you will beat me," said Yamada.

Cahill's head jerked up a little at that. The beast sat perfectly still.

"But that's not the question. The real question is: How long?"

Hall frowned as if he didn't understand.

Yamada smiled, a cold, hard smile. "Shall I spell it out for you?"

Hall said nothing.

Yamada placed his hands together, palm to palm. "Perhaps you know that I fought Clan Smoke Jaguar. One of the things I learned then was that there was not a Star Colonel alive who didn't yearn to be a Galaxy Commander. And not a Galaxy Commander who didn't yearn to be a Khan. And I suppose no Khan who didn't yearn to be ilKhan."

Hall maintained his silence, but his eyes narrowed.

"*Hai*, in the end you will win Richmond," said Yamada almost cheerfully. (He could feel the talent for manipulation growing in him like a cancer, feel himself growing more like the beast every day.) "But how long will it take? How long before you can move on to the next battlefield? Move on to the next chance for... glory?" Yamada turned his back to Hall's giant face and shuffled some papers on a desk. "How long before you are reinforced?"

When he turned back, Hall no longer could have been mistaken for a holoivid star. His face was taut and hard, and Yamada guessed it was taking every ounce of Hall's control to keep from exploding. "What do you propose?" It came out as a growl.

"A Trial of Possession," said Yamada. "If you win, the DCMS will withdraw from the city. And if I win: a truce."

"How long?" said Hall.

Yamada shrugged. "Two weeks."

Hall blinked. "I am sure *you* expect to be reinforced in two weeks."

"Perhaps. But I may be able to delay you nearly that long anyway. And how long do you really have? How long before some eager

Star Colonel takes the next promising world? I hear Schuyler has already fallen."

For a long moment, no words passed between the two men. Finally, Hall said "What force composition do you propose for this trial?"

This was the moment of maximum danger. The moment when all he'd planned and sacrificed for might be stripped from him. He stepped into it like he would've faced any other danger. "A single BattleMech on each side. Your *Kodiak* against my *Atlas*."

The beast stood up at that.

Yamada turned and bowed low from the waist. "Unless the honorable *Tai-sa* Maru wishes to claim the honor for himself."

For a second Yamada locked eyes with the beast. Slowly the beast eased back into his chair.

Yamada turned back to the screen. "It seems that we here have the stomach for such a duel. What about Clan Ghost Bear, Star Colonel Hall?"

Hall nodded slowly. "Bargained well."

Then the screen went black.

The beast launched himself out of his chair. "*Are you mad?*"

Yamada met the man's anger steadily. He glanced over at Cahill and then back to the beast. He had no need to say the words: *Have I been wrong yet? Would you rather turn the defense of the city over to her?*

The beast jabbed an angry finger at him. "You had better win." Then he stalked out of the room, Cahill in tow.

Yamada watched them go. In truth, neither Hall nor the beast knew what he had planned. Only five days in the service of war and already he was a liar and a murderer. Truly, he grew more like the beast every minute.

DCMS Command Center, Newport, Richmond
Pesht Military District
Draconis Combine
21 November 3062

The sound of Yamada's footsteps echoed on the ferrocrete of the BattleMech storage facility as he walked toward his *Atlas*. He wore only boots, a pair of shorts, and his cooling vest. What he was about to do would be difficult, but there was little doubt in his mind that he could do it. Was he not the greatest MechWarrior the little world of Richmond had ever produced?

He shook his head at that grim thought.

The techs had painted the *Atlas* a mottled green and gray, a paint scheme that would help disguise it in the Black Foothills. Yamada would've preferred to leave the *Atlas* unpainted, clean silver, but the beast had insisted. The fate of this world depended on this duel and the beast was unwilling to cede any possible advantage.

At least he had allowed Yamada to keep the cherry tree.

The Richmond Reserves was an ad hoc unit with no history and no emblem. Yamada had noticed that some of the other 'Mech pilots had painted his tree on their own war machines. It didn't surprise him.

But it did make him sad.

Despite his best efforts no one really understood what that tree meant.

"*Sho-sa* Yamada."

Yamada turned.

Cahill stood behind him wearing a pair of gray coveralls. She bowed low. "I just wanted to wish you luck and say..." She licked her lips. "I wanted to say that you are a great warrior."

"A great warrior." Yamada snorted. "I can think of no insult more vile."

Cahill swallowed. "I used to think that the members of the peace movement were weak. Afraid to fight." She shook her head. "But you're not. So? Why did you join them?"

"If you can even ask that question then perhaps you should go back and reexamine the wreckage on the southern road."

"Is there nothing worth fighting for?" she asked angrily. "Nothing worth dying for?"

"Those are two separate questions," said Yamada. "The answers are 'iie' and 'hai,' respectively."

"Then it is evil to fight."

"*Hai*," Yamada snapped.

"And no good man may take up arms against his brother?"

"Right again," said Yamada angrily.

"If that is true, then must not good always cede the battlefield to evil?"

Yamada stared at her for a long moment, shaking with fury. Then he turned his back on Cahill and climbed the chain-link ladder that led to the cockpit of his *Atlas*.

***The Black Foothills, Richmond
Pesht Military District
Draconis Combine
21 November 3062***

The Black Foothills gained their name from the massive evergreens that covered the area, blanketing the forest floor in darkness. Hall pushed his *Kodiak* slowly through the woods, knocking down pines and cedars and fir trees, leaving a trail of destruction behind him.

Letting the sun into this dark place.

He moved slowly partly because the *Kodiak* was slow, but also because he intended to be damn careful this time. He remembered well the sight of a monstrous apparition rising out of the river, water cascading off its horrific silver form.

He would not let that happen again.

Which was why he was pushing through trees as he searched for Yamada. He had decided to avoid the dirt logging road that weaved its way through the Black Foothills. No roads. The engagement by the river had taught him that, at least.

Unfortunately the Black Foothills were dotted with small valleys and ridges perfect for hiding 'Mechs, even one as massive as an *Atlas*. Hall was sure that was exactly what Yamada was doing: hiding. If there was any doubt, all he had to do was look down at the white snow that degraded the performance of his radar repeater.

More small emitters.

The DCMS officer could call this arrangement a Trial of Possession if he wanted to, but Hall did not expect for one second that his enemy would fight with honor. And so Hall had ordered a pair of aerospace fighters into the sky. The *Ammons* orbited high overhead awaiting his orders. The second he saw any hint of betrayal, Hall would call in an air strike. The Star Colonel hoped for an honest fight.



But he was ready either way.

I can beat this barbarian scum, Hall thought. No, I *will* beat him.

The *Sho-sa* had shown himself to be cunning, just as a leopard was cunning. But like the big cat, Yamada was beyond reason, beyond the rules of men. Those traits made him dangerous, often to others, yes, but sometimes to himself as well.

This time Hall would turn the *Sho-sa*'s dishonor against him like a blade.

If he could only find him. Yamada had yet to do anything to violate the strictures of *zellbrigen*, but this endless search for him was maddening. Perhaps it was Yamada's plan to bore him to death.

A high-pitched jump tone shrieked for his attention.

Fire control radar.

Hall's eyes flicked down to his repeater. *The snow was gone.* Yamada must've had some sort of remote for turning the ECM emitters off and on.

Large blip, undoubtedly an assault 'Mech bearing east-northeast, less than a quarter klick out, which would just about put him on the—

The volley of missiles hit as Hall was turning his beast toward the road. Explosions rippled across his chest, vaporizing armor and throwing him off his stride, but doing little serious damage.

Hall thumb-touched the red stud that would release his own flight of missiles, glanced back at the repeater and—

The snow was back.

"Oh, you clever, clever bastard," Hall muttered under his breath.

He pushed his *Kodiak* into an ungainly run, toppling trees in his path and setting the earth trembling. Yamada had disengaged his electronic countermeasures long enough to get a radar lock and launch a missile strike and then had reenergized ECM before Hall could reply. But he had made one critical error.

Now Hall knew where he was.

Hall's *Kodiak* burst through the treeline and stepped forward onto the dirt road. He saw the back of an *Atlas* pushing through the trees on the other side of the road. Hall raised both paws and poured emerald fire into the retreating 'Mech's back.

The *Atlas* veered left, taking it out of Hall's line of fire.

But it was close enough for Hall to lock on with thermal sensors.

He loosed a flight of Streak SRMs at the *Atlas* and charged down Yamada's trail of broken trees. Hall saw the explosion bloom white on his IR sensor. "Yes," said Hall. The bloom was huge. He must have set off a secondary explosion within the *Atlas*, which meant—

No.

Hall saw an orange flame licking at the forest understory. He had not destroyed the *Atlas*. Instead Yamada was using his energy weapons to set the forest ablaze. Having denied Hall the use of his radar, the *Sho-sa* was trying to do the same with his thermal sensors.

We shall just see about that, Hall thought savagely.

He hit his jump jets and leapt skyward on pillars of superheated plasma vented out of his feet. He came down hard, landing on crouched legs not a quarter click behind the *Atlas*. Even before Hall straightened up he was pouring a steady stream of autocannon fire into the other 'Mech.

Yamada answered with his twin rear-mounted pulse lasers, slicing into Hall's torso armor.

The *Atlas* pivoted, bringing its hip-mounted Gauss rifle to bear as Hall took a step forward. The massive projectile slammed into his chest and knocked the *Kodiak* off stride, giving the other 'Mech just enough time to complete its turn and expose its more heavily armored chest to Hall. He saw the strange cherry tree emblem painted on the *Atlas*'s left shoulder.

Hall lashed out with his lasers and his massive autocannon.

Yamada answered with his arm-mounted lasers and his Gauss rifle.

For a single, horrible moment the forest was a hell of ruby light and exploding ordinance.

Then the *Atlas* backed away, keeping its damaged rear armor turned away from the *Kodiak* and out of reach.

Hall broke off his attack and charged *around* Yamada's path. His great garrison 'Mech *could* go toe-to-toe with the *Atlas*, but if he could get behind Yamada he might end this all with twenty or thirty seconds of sustained fire.

The Star Colonel glanced down at his thermal scanner. The small sun at the heart of Yamada's *Atlas* was an incandescent white circle. But it was already starting to fade into the brightening background as the fire started to burn in earnest. Already the fire prevented Hall from achieving a missile lock.

But he had a good enough idea of Yamada's position for a close quarters attack.

Hall hit his jump jets and star-hot plasma punched him skyward. His eyes flickered downward in time to see Yamada's signature merge into the thermal background. His computer was not going to give him a firing solution this time.

This was something he was going to have to feel.

Hall cut his jets and Richmond's gravity pulled him down in a ballistic arc.

He came down. *Hard*. Hard enough to send a shiver of force rippling through the earth. Hard enough to launch a shower of orange sparks into the air as he smashed through a copse of burning pines. Hard enough that his gyrostabilizer whined in protest.

But his instincts had not failed him.

He had landed less than twenty meters from the *Atlas*.

And behind him.

Yamada was better than the *Sunder* pilot had been. In the second it took for Hall to steady himself the *Atlas* was already turning to the right to face him. Hall's massive Ultra-20 autocannon cut a line in Yamada's armor from back to front cutting across the other 'Mech's right arm.

And into the medium laser mounted there.

Hall had not done the damage he had planned to the other 'Mech's back, but he had disabled one of Yamada's weapons.

And he was close.

With a growl deep in this throat, Hall closed the distance between his enemy with a couple quick strides and clamped down on Yamada's disabled right arm with his left. He reached forward with his right claw and shredded the *Atlas*'s chest armor.

But Yamada was not the *Sunder* pilot.

He did not struggle to free his useless right arm and he did not bring his left arm around for a laser shot. Instead he pushed off with his massive legs, throwing 100 tons of assault 'Mech right into Hall's *Kodiak*.

The two great 'Mechs went down like a pair of barroom brawlers.

Hall was on the bottom.

Well over a quarter *million* pounds of 'Mechs crashed to the earth. This time the earth did not just shudder, it groaned and broke, *shattered* under the weight of the two machines tangled together like lovers. The force of the impact knocked Hall's teeth together and flung him against his five-point safety harness, hard enough to push the air out of his lungs. Reality dimmed for a moment.

When it came back Hall found that somehow, *somehow*, Yamada had managed to partially free his *Atlas* from the embrace, because he was staring up at the barrel of the *Atlas*'s left arm laser pressed right up against the cracked surface of his ferroglass canopy.

Hall's radio crackled. "I would like to speak with you, Star Colonel."

"Do it," Hall snarled. "Do not toy with me, Yamada. *Fire*."

"There is another way."

"You have won the Trial of Possession. There is no other way."

"Actually," said Yamada, "I thought we might put the Trial of Possession on hold for a few minutes. And discuss the terms of my surrender."

"W-what?" Hall stammered. "But you have won. Why would you—"

"No one's won anything here," said Yamada, and for the first time his voice sounded sharp.

"You have won. What do you want from me?"

Yamada sighed. "And what have I won? A chance for the DCMS to reinforce this world so the battle will go on longer, killing more young warriors on both sides? And what if the Combine prevails? Your forces will be back in ten years or twenty. Or someone else's will be. None of this solves anything."

Hall shook his head. "I do not—"

"Clan Ghost Bear has a reputation of tolerance toward conquered populations. I ask you if this reputation is deserved."

"We interfere less with native cultures than others would. The Jade Falcons, say. But, I still do not—"

"On this world, I was the head of a peace movement."

"Peace movement?" Hall whispered. The words tasted strange in his mouth.

"A movement of people that argues there is another way, a *better* way than war."

Hall gasped. "Th-that is *obscene*." His voice shook with fury.

"I have heard it said many times that Clanners are humanity's finest warriors. If that's true, if it carries with it even a *grain* of truth, you will be able to defeat an idea in a fair fight as easily as you can defeat an enemy." Yamada's voice dropped a notch. "Or are you afraid?"

"I fear nothing."

"Good. Then if you give me your word of honor as a warrior that you will allow this organization to function after you capture this world, I will concede this trial to you."

Hall chewed on that for a moment, pondering a way out. "What if the DCMS does not honor your surrender?"

Yamada snorted. "The Richmond Reserves are filled with fools and children. Without me they will crumble in your hands like an *origami* swan. The city will fall and soon after that the rest of the world."

Suddenly Hall saw it, saw it all. He could have Richmond and the opportunity to hit the next world. All he had ever wished for lay within his grasp. All he had to do was forsake his honor and claim a victory that truthfully belonged to another man.

And suffer the existence of a movement of weakness, growing like a cancer within his Clan.

"And if I say no?"

"Then I *will* kill you." Yamada's voice was full of ice.

Death or glory. Honor or victory. The compromise tasted bitter in his mouth.

He would not bear it alone.

"I accept your proposal," said Hall. "On one condition."

"Hai?" Yamada sounded hesitant.

"You will agree to serve as my bondsmen."

"I am a man of peace," said Yamada.

Now it was Hall's turn to snort. "Then kill me now, 'man of peace.'"



"Then kill me now, 'man of peace.'" Yamada heard the harsh bray of Hall's laughter over his radio and winced. How could he allow himself to become *isorla* after all he'd been through, all he believed?

Could he do that? Give himself to war for the sake of peace? Certainly, it was no greater a sacrifice than that of the young men and women whose bodies had been shattered by a Gauss slug or burned to carbon by a laser or torn asunder by the death rattle of an autocannon.

Yamada believed in peace with his heart and soul, but war was something that grabbed a man by the gut and didn't let go. The truth was that all those years of meditation had done him little good. War was like a drug and now that he'd had one more taste how could he ever give it up? It was too late for him. He had been ruined by the glory of war, the savage beauty of combat.

And suddenly he understood the true meaning of the cherry tree, struggling to be what it was, *what it had to be*, despite the presence of the wall. Like the tree he revered, Shintaro Yamada had no choice but to be what he was, and what was he, if not a warrior?

Slowly Yamada pulled his arm and its laser back from the *Kodiak's* cracked canopy and readied himself to serve the only master he'd ever truly known.

The End