BATTLECORPS

The Back Road

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"What's your name?" I ask, purposefully avoiding his question. I flex my calf, feel the knife sheath hard against my skin. Remember how effortlessly that knife slid into the cabby's gut. Instinct—born from years of special forces training—rears its long-toothed head, makes my hand itch to pull that same knife, to excise the threat now facing me.

No use wondering how killing got so easy. All it takes is time and experience.

"I said—you know anything about that dead man back there?" The boy shifts the pitchfork in his hand, angles the tines so they catch the sunlight oozing through overcast skies.

There are two reasons I came back to this farm on Buckminster: One—to find my roots. Two—to find my soul. I did not come back to kill boys who pretend to be men.

Sometimes the best way to bluff is to tell the honest truth. What makes the bluff work is the part you choose to tell. I jerk my chin in the general direction of the cab driver's body. "He tried to rob me. Brought me all the way out here and then came after me with a gun."

The boy licks his lower lip, turns the thought over in his mind. He keeps his eye on me, starts to lower the pitchfork—an opening I let pass—then stops, pitchfork still threatening.

"Why don't you tell that story to my pa?" He lifts his head and I get a good look at his eyes—dark brown, direct—Lucas eyes. Just like his daddy's.

The air smells of late summer—earth baked into laziness like a mother about to give birth. I glance around, check the area for anyone else who might be hiding in the hip-high grasses. A wheat hybrid, from the looks of it. I pull a stalk between my fingers, stripping chaff and grain into my hand. Smell the rich, nutty scent. Harvest was the one time my daddy and I could work together without fighting. "About time to get some AgroMechs working, isn't it?"

The question hangs in the air as I watch the boy's face charge with emotion—anger?—and go flat.

"Pa don't hold with 'Mechs of any kind," he says.

A breeze ripples across the field, takes me back down memory lane and it's me standing in this harvest-ready field watching a

MechWarrior stride down the road. Taller than the barn I'd grown up playing in. Aligned crystal steel armor on the outside, human heart and brain inside. Proud and ready to fight. I'd known then I was going to be a warrior. Not just any warrior. A warrior who could prove to my father just how wrong his simple beliefs were. I would become a member of the Draconis Elite Strike Teams—a dream I'd long ago realized.

A dream that would take away my ability to touch my emotions, that would tear my family apart.

"You're Phelan Lucas's boy, aren't you? I heard your daddy bought this place. This used to be my home. I grew up here." I hold my hands to the side, put on my best good-old-boy smile, but the boy's still suspicious. He isn't buying what I have to sell. "Come on now, put down the fork. Then we can have a nice, civilized conversation."

"How 'bout I keep my 'fork' and you start moving."

The kid is young, but that pitchfork is full grown, with three nasty looking tines it would definitely hurt to run into. I glance over my shoulder. Stare across the field on the other side of the road where the boy's gaze keeps drifting.

Nagoshima is a distant smudge against the slate gray sky. It's not the city that draws the boy's attention, though. The sounds of mock battle drift toward us on a slight breeze that ruffles the grass and tugs the boy's hat brim. Familiar sounds. Even though they're too far away to see, I know what I'm hearing as well as I know the lines on my face.

BattleMechs. Engaged in a live-fire training exercise.

My own gaze follows the boy's and suddenly I'm back in the cockpit again, locking down my harness, stretching my chin to get comfortable as I slide the neurohelmet over my head, attach the biocables, and power up...

I cut the memories short, feel sweat slick beneath my arms. Piloting 'Mechs had been only one of my jobs, but the inside of a cockpit is not an easy place to forget.

The boy doesn't seem to have noticed my preoccupation. The 'Mechs are far enough away he can't possibly see much detail, yet a look of longing sits upon his face.

Would he still wear that same look if he knew how it feels to bake inside a machine, weapons firing salvo after salvo, the stench of

sweat and fear oozing from your body like pus, while all around you people—real people inside their own machines—are dying?

I take a step forward and immediately stop as the pitchfork raises, its tines glistening with menace.

"Don't you come no further," the boy warns. His chin lifts and I see the challenge in his eyes. I toy with the idea of meeting the challenge, but that was the old me. The new me has made a different choice: Stop killing and go home.

If only things were that easy.

"I like your caution, kid. Caution helps you live longer." I keep my hands spread and move toward the farm house at the far end of the field. Even though he can't possibly see the 'Mechs from where we stand the boy can't resist one last glance toward the horizon as I pass by. His hunger matches the hunger I once felt.

"You know what it's like inside those machines?" I walk a little to the side so I can keep an eye on that pitchfork.

"You ain't no MechWarrior." In spite of his protest, the boy's eyes are wide. He lets the pitchfork drop a little lower.

"For awhile you feel like you're on top of the world and nobody can knock you down." I remember well the feeling of accomplishment, of pride mixed with a bit of arrogance. "Then you start to get tired of the heat that bakes you like bread inside an oven every time you fire your weapons. Get tired of feeling scared. Get tired of the killing."

"I knew you weren't no Warrior. 'Mechs ain't scared of nothing." The boy's look turns to disdain. "One day I'm gonna be up there, riding one of those 'Mechs."

We walk a few steps in silence, me trying to figure out how to get out of this mess, the boy chewing on his lip as if trying to make up his mind about something.

"I thought your daddy didn't like 'Mechs?" I ask, more to keep the boy's mind occupied and his pitchfork in a less ominous position.

"Pa thinks they cause more trouble than they take care of."

"And you think he's wrong." Didn't surprise me to hear Lucas felt that way. He and my daddy went way back. I let my hands brush the heavily seeded grass as we walk, watch the breeze pick off the chaff and carry it away while the seeds fall to the ground.

"All's he cares about is planting and harvesting. 'Mechs take care of people." There's definitely a note of bitterness in my new friend's voice.

"Planting grain is an investment in the future," I say, ironically mimicking my own daddy's words. "Harvesting that grain is what keeps us alive, what keeps those warriors alive."

It had taken me years to see the truth in those words. Years filled with bloodshed and death. Deaths justified by the code of the Dragon, but not by my heart.

"They should be more careful when they come through, the 'Mechs, I mean. They're so big, they can't always see where they put their feet. I try to tell Pa that, but it don't matter to him. All's he sees are the crops they stomp into the ground."

Rebellion isn't new to Buckminster, a fact I can personally attest to. Rebellion had allowed me to leave home when I came of age; I plan on that same rebellion allowing me to return to that home.

"Your daddy's got a point."

The boy's point—a very sharp, metal point—presses through the back of my shirt. My cab driver's uniform shirt. Something I'm sure I'll have to explain when I meet up with Lucas.

The smell of roasting meat fills the air as we approach the farmhouse. My stomach responds to the tantalizing aroma in an almost violent fashion, reminding me I've missed several meals already today.

Telling me I'm home.

Funny how it doesn't feel like home. It doesn't feel anything except a little bit familiar.

I close my eyes and see chickens pecking in the yard, hear laundry flapping on the clothesline, taste the sweet tang of vine-ripe tomatoes. A small flock of Bucky browns, indigenous birds no larger than a ten-year old boy's hand, wanders among the chickens. My father always claimed the birds were nothing but a nuisance, but my mother loved the undersize bits of fluff. She refused to use anything but the iridescent brown feathers in pillows and quilts.

A cold, wet nose presses into my hand. I open my eyes, stare at the mangy creature sniffing my palm. A dune pup.

"You're quite a ways from home." I give the pup's head a pat, then rub my fingers hard against my pant leg. No one's quite sure where dune pups originated, but one touch of the wiry, sand-colored hair plastered against their skin like a thin sheet of armor is enough to set a body's skin crawling.

"*This* is his home," the boy says and I nod. Home for boy and pup, yes. But not the same home I left behind.

We turn away from the white clapboard house with its sumptuous smells and lace curtains flapping in the windows and follow the mutt into the barn.

"Got my first whopping in this barn," I say, but the boy doesn't answer. I remember vividly the look on my daddy's face that day. I told him I wanted to be a MechWarrior. He said there were only farmers in our family. A lot of things changed that day.

My father.

Me.

I'd seen a lot of barns on a lot of different planets since then. One thing that's standard in any barn—round topped or pitched roof, old or new, red or gray—is the sweet scent of animal sweat mixed with fresh mown hay. A scent I've missed without even realizing it.

Funny how sharp memories can be when they're connected with smells and how that same smell can bring fond memories forward to replace the bad. I can almost see my friends and I leaping from the loft into fresh cut hay, challenging each other to see who can jump the highest, the furthest. Who can do double somersaults...

"Who you got there, Con?"

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. At first all I can make out is a shadow moving toward us. The shadow slowly resolves into a hulk of a man wearing the same type of clothes as the boy. Only the man's carrying a rifle in one hand, tipped behind him just enough I can't quite identify the make or model.

"I found this guy in the field, Pa. He killed a cabby."

Phelan Lucas pulls off his hat and wipes his forehead, looking at me all the while. He's older than I remember. What's left of his hair is steel gray. Wrinkles fill his leathery face. The wrinkles aren't

laugh lines, though. They're the lines of a life hard-earned. The life of a man who doesn't fool around with games, who believes that anyone or anything who threatens his family or his livelihood is better off six feet under.

Like a bug under a microscope, Lucas examines me from head to toe without moving. I could tell him my name, but I wait, wanting him to reach out to me, to somehow crack the shell of numbness that's grown so thick I can no longer feel the world. His gaze meets mine, probing, assessing. All the years of training have built a self-assurance into my body that's almost impossible to hide. He sees this confidence. Knows I could kill him and the boy right now if I wanted.

And he's not intimidated. "You carrying any weapons?

No partial truths here. The only way to deal with a man like Phelan Lucas is with total honesty. I move slow. Pull my right pant leg up high enough to show the edge of my ankle sheath. Let the pant leg slide back into place. The boy chokes back a startled yelp, but Lucas says nothing.

Sounds outside are muffled, like someone covered the barn with a heavy blanket. A large animal snorts somewhere deeper in the shadows. A hen cackles for a moment, then goes quiet. I can hear Con breathing—quick, fast little breaths that betray his anxiety. His father takes slow, deep breaths. Quiet breaths.

Breaths like mine.

I let a touch of a smile reach my eyes. Lucas's brow furrows in puzzlement.

"I know you," he says. Then his brow clears and he laughs. The end of the rifle dips down toward the floor. "You're Hendal's boy, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir." I should feel relief, but the shell hasn't cracked. Not yet.

"Didn't recognize you with that clown suit on and all." He pokes at the cabby's shirt.

"I borrowed this uniform from a man who doesn't need it anymore."

Lucas's gaze gets a bit more appraising. I begin to feel less like a bug and more like a mouse beneath a cat's paw. I lift my hands just slightly to ease his mind.

"I've had a bit of a run in with the authorities, Mr. Lucas. Seems they and I don't see eye to eye anymore." I visited my daddy's grave on the way out to this place. Tried to tell him he was right about the 'Mechs. Right about everything.

"Your pa always said you'd come back. Too bad he ain't here..." Phelan Lucas clears his throat. "So you're a deserter now, huh?"

Deserter.

The word rings in my ears. A man who should have killed himself rather than bring shame on House Kurita. Bad enough for a Combine MechWarrior to fail his duty—such a man would be dealt a swift death— but for DEST, death would take its sweet torturous time.

I dip my chin in an almost nod, feel my face flush with heat.

"You weren't never no 'Mech." Con's voice is filled with loathing.

"That's enough, boy." Lucas takes a deep breath and crams his hat back onto his head. He tucks the rifle into the crook of his arm and steps forward, right hand outstretched.

"Good to see you."

I take his hand in a firm grip, matching his strength, but not offering more. "Likewise, Mr. Lucas."

Lucas chuckles and I smile.

This almost seems too easy, but sometimes life's gifts are that way. You struggle along a rocky path, climbing mountain after mountain, and then suddenly the path opens up on a wide meadow and it's easy going—until you reach the next mountain.

"I need a place to stay for awhile. Just until I get my feet back under me."

"We don't hold with deserters 'round here. 'Mech patrols shoot 'em deader than a squashed roach." Con's scowl deepens.

Lucas raises an eyebrow, puts a hand on Con's shoulder.

"Go see if your ma needs help with supper."

Con's face grows more sullen. He hangs the pitchfork on the wall and heads out the barn door without saying a word. Lucas turns back to me.

"Look, I got enough trouble with 'Mech patrols nosing around. If they find out I got a deserter hiding out..."

"I watched a friend die, Mr. Lucas." How do you explain collapsing containment fields and 'Mech reactors self-destructing in a fiery inferno to a non-military man? "Her 'Mech burned itself up from the inside out with her trapped inside. Three of my lance went down with her."

Amazing how empty words can be when there's no feeling attached. I want to ache inside, to cry, but all I feel is nothingness, the cold void of space.

Lucas puts a hand on my shoulder, gives me a gentle shake. "Sometimes life ain't too kind. Your friend was doing what she had to do. We all do what we have to. It's how we survive."

Words. They fill the emptiness and then melt away as if they were never there. I shake my head, glance over at the pitchfork resting against the wall. "I should've died with them, but I'm still here. Why am I still here?"

Before Lucas can answer I hear rumbling outside. A distant sound like shuffling thunder. A familiar sound.

The sound of BattleMechs on the road.

"I think we have company," I say.

Lucas's expression doesn't change, but he steps forward and waves at me to follow.

We move deeper into the shadows. There's a storage locker at the back of the barn, with a heavy wooden door that swings open with a groan when Lucas tugs at the handle. He steps inside, switches on a light. "Plenty of fresh manure in the barn and a lot of hot air outside. Should mess up a 'Mech's monitors pretty good. Con wasn't fooling—these new guys can be pretty nasty if they get a bee in their helmets."

He smiles as if remembering I already know this.

The barn may have brought back some nostalgic memories, but closed-in spaces bring back memories of war. Of death. Of pain. I take a deep breath. Let it out slowly. Gather my energy like a coiled serpent ready to strike...

...and force my muscles to relax. I've already brought enough trouble to those I care about. I step inside. Look Lucas in the eye.

"How do you clean memories from your mind, Mr. Lucas? How do you let go?" I lean up against the wall, wrap my arms around my waist. "I can't get her picture out of my head. Every time I look at a 'Mech, I see her face, charred so badly I only know it's her because of the medallion she wore around her neck. For good luck, she said. But where was luck when her system malfunctioned? When she was trapped inside that burning hulk of metal?"

"If I had the answer to that question, son, I'd be doing more'n sitting here on this farm waiting for 'Mechs to tromp through my crops." Lucas starts to close the door, then stops. "I'll leave it cracked for you, but the light'll have to go."

I nod as he switches off the light and eases the door shut.

The room is pitch black until my eyes make the adjustment. Something rustles in the back. Habit forces my hand to the knife sheath, pulls the blade free before I make any conscious decision. A small slice of light sneaks through the cracked door and glows across my blade. I feel the edge, razor sharp and ready to kill. Listen for the rustle.

But whoever—whatever—is in the back of this room is quiet now. Listening for me.

Voices whisper in the corner of my mind. Living nightmares of the dead who can no longer speak. I press the knife against my palm to drive the voices away. Turn my thoughts to the barn and the last words I'd heard my father speak.

"Killing ain't the answer, boy. Never was. Never will be. You're nothing but six legs and a strong back far as the military's concerned—a mountain mule willing to give his soul for a pat on the nose. Our place is here, working with the land. All killing ever got anybody like us is dead."

Sometime during the last few years my father's words, words spoken so long ago the memory was just a dusting upon my mind, began to make sense.

Doubt—in the system, in my superiors—crept through my being like an insidious disease, worming its way through my thoughts until every order was suspect, every action tinged with uncertainty. Yet I continued to follow orders until those same orders killed my comrades.

My friends.

The ground trembles—a vibration you can feel in your feet, but can't see with your eyes. I know from the feel the contingent approaching is small. Probably a single 'Mech on security patrol. From Lucas's reaction this isn't an uncommon occurrence, just an unwelcome one, though why 'Mechs are patrolling this area is something I can't quite figure.

Unless they're searching for deserters.

My heart skips a beat. My breath quickens. A small part of my mind notices the fear, the anticipation before the feeling slips away. My body is ready to react, like a well-oiled machine, a machine I no longer want any part of.

Another feeling slides through the crack that's starting to open in my shell. Shame. I came home looking for answers, not to hide in the dark.

I ease open the storage room door, look around before making my move. The barn appears empty. Hay muffles my footsteps as I steal across the open floor and take up position beside the huge doorway.

From my post I can make out the approaching 'Mech—a scarred BH-K305 *Battle Hawk*. Sunlight slants across the yard, bounces off the metal body in a flash of blinding light. The machine stops, its huge legs casting shadows from the evening sun across the barn. Lucas stands calmly before the 'Mech, rifle resting in the crook of his arm.

Adrenaline stings my gut and pulses through my veins. Have I judged Lucas right? Is the man who now owns my daddy's house the man I think he is?

A gray-haired woman—sturdy as the land she helps tend—steps out on the porch. I can feel anxiety radiating from her straight mouth. She clenches a towel in her hands, wrings the cloth like a chicken being killed for dinner. Lucas waves her away. After a brief pause, she stomps inside and slams the porch door behind her.

I center myself, try to stem the flow of paranoia. My throat clogs as I watch the Battle Hawk shut down. The egress hatch opens and a chain link ladder clanks down the 'Mech's side. A pilot—dressed in legless suit and boots—steps from the hatch, his sweat-plastered hair glistening wetly in the sun. The man looks as out of place on this quiet farm as his 'Mech. He pauses at the top of the ladder, glances around, reaches back inside before descending to the ground, right hand hidden from view.

"Hello, Mr. Lucas. You planning on trouble?" The pilot wears a smile on his face, but his eyes are wary. He holds his right hand back by his side, gestures with his left at the rifle in Lucas's hand.

"Just scaring off critters," Lucas says. I start to relax. Things are going just fine...

Con runs out of the house, his face filled with defiance. "There's a deserter in the barn. He killed a cabby and threatened my pa."

Lucas is startled. I can see the anger in his face from here. The confusion. I lean hard against the rough wood planks, feel a splinter slide deep in my palm.

The pilot's face isn't friendly anymore. "That's a serious accusation, son."

"There's no one in the barn but an old friend." Lucas lifts the rifle across his chest. He takes hold of Con's arm and pulls him tight to his side. "He's been helping us out, ain't that right, boy?"

The pilot stares into Con's eyes, but the boy doesn't answer. I can practically feel his hatred from here. His anger burns like mine used to burn and I know it's only a matter of time. I tuck my blade up into my right sleeve, step out into the sunlight.

"Heard a commotion..." I fake surprise at the sight of the 'Mech. "Whoa. That's some machine."

The pilot glances up, surprise and suspicion written on his face. His right hand swings free and his eyes narrow as he studies the cabby's uniform. He glances at the barn. At Lucas. At Con. Back at me.

And I know that he knows.

"This your deserter?" the pilot asks Con. He brings up his right hand, points the weapon he's been concealing in my direction.

"That's not necessary. Like I said, this here's an old friend." Lucas's big hand holds Con close. The pilot scans the yard and his eyes come back to me.

"You got some identification to go with that uniform?"

I nod. Reach in my pocket. Swallow and try to wet the dryness in my mouth. I am more than what the military made me, I remind myself. More than a killing machine.

That's why I came home. Not to kill, but to keep from killing. To find the truth behind my daddy's words. To find out why the man behind the machine died.

And maybe to bring him back to life.

But sometimes things don't always go the way we plan.

I pull out the cabby's ID and walk over to the 'Mech pilot.

"He's got a knife!" Con ducks out from beneath Lucas's arm and charges me from the side.

The pilot spins, weapon flashing in his hand. Lucas raises his rifle as the pilot fires a shot that creases my leg. The leg stings with pain, but I block it so swiftly it might not have happened. I dodge behind the laundry, feel the years of training, the years of battle struggle to take over. Death is what identifies me. Killing's all I know. All I have known since I was little more than Con's age.

"No!" Con's voice slices through the air just as the rifle cracks. The boy crumples to the ground, Lucas reaching for him like a drowning man grabs for rope.

I dive into a forward roll, come up beside the pilot. He stares at the boy on the ground, at Lucas kneeling by Con's side. Red coats my vision, painting pictures of MechWarriors falling, burning...

The instant kill zone between the fourth and fifth intercostal spaces is where I've been trained to strike, but that would be too merciful. I shove my knife deep into the man's gut.

"You didn't have to hurt them," I hiss as warm blood spills out over my hand, a dark flow that matches the darkness inside me.

His eyes turn to mine, his glare filled with disdain, and he spits in my face.

I shove the knife deeper, give it a twist, watch the light fade from his eyes before pulling my knife free.

"Lucas?" The woman's panic-tinged voice shrills across the yard as the porch door slams. I whip

around, ready once again to defend myself. It takes a moment for reality to sink in. For the battle haze to clear from my mind.

Lucas sits crumpled on the ground beside Con. His eyes are red, tears streak his cheeks.

"I was trying to distract him," Lucas whispers. "But Con got in the way."

Red seeps from Con's side. I kneel down, pull aside his shirt. Glance at the wound.

"It's a clean shot," I tell Lucas. "Through and through. He'll be okay as long as you get him to a doctor."

Con's mother shoves me aside and pulls her son to her breast. I give the woman room. Breathe deep the dust-laden air.

MechWarrior blood sticks the cabby's shirt to my ribs. I clean my blade on the shirttails—the blade I should have used to end my own life rather than bring the shame of a deserter upon the House of Kurita—and slip it back into its sheath.

"You're nothing but a yellow-bellied coward," Con says. He pushes his mother away, but his gaze—filled with hatred and pain—stays fixed on me.

Lucas stands. Grabs my arm.

"You can't stay now." His voice is raspy, his eyes filled with an apology I know he'll never make.

"I know." I try to keep the desperation from my face, but I know he's seen it. "It's just that..."

"Coming home's not always the answer," Lucas says.

Con's face grows hard as a 'Mech's armor. He struggles to his feet, leans briefly on his mother, then straightens. "He's a damn deserter. He don't have no home."

The bitter statement slices at my heart in a way I'd thought I'd never feel again. I draw a deep breath, let the feeling run through me. Someday the boy will understand.

I look deep in Con's eyes, at the determination, the desire.

Then again, maybe he won't.

I pause a moment to let the pain in my knee subside. The wound will take a long time to heal, I know that from experience. My soul will take longer, but the shell's been broken now. I glance back into the barn, let my gaze linger on the loft, draw the sweet hay scent deep into my lungs, feel the pain stab my heart once more.

And turn to leave.

"I'll hunt you down, you know." Con's voice is flat and low, the way it was when he first confronted me. Lethal—like a poisonous snake. "When I get my 'Mech..."

"Con!" Lucas's hand is raised as if to strike his son. He lowers it slowly. Lines drawn heavy by life's hand deepen on his face, revealing the battle within.

A battle my own father lost.

'Mech against 'Mech. Machine against human. Father against son.

There's a chance my soul will heal.

But another soul will slowly leach away, minute by inexorable minute, until boy becomes man.

And man becomes machine.