

BATTLECORPS

**HUNTER OF
THE YELLOW BIRD**

Steven Mohan, Jr.

***Paschal District, Northwest of the Palace District
Imperial City, Luthien
Pesht Military District, Draconis Combine
22 December 3070***

Even after all these years, *Tai-i* Albert Benton found waiting to be the hardest thing of all. One would think that nearly a decade of command would have taught him some patience. He shook his head.

How had Sorenson managed it?

Benton sat in darkness, his *Black Hawk* still and silent in the abandoned warehouse provided by a yakuza *oyabun* still loyal to Theodore Kurita.

Benton swallowed painfully.

Still loyal to Theodore Kurita's *memory*.

He leaned forward and touched his control panel, cycling through the presets. Images of intersections flashed on his main screen, a parade of concrete and glass. This far north there was no teak.

Finding nothing interesting in the live feeds, he returned to the tactical schematic, which showed the crimson symbols of the First Genyosha deployed in a long skirmish line along *Horikawa-dori*. As Benton watched, a set of black icons threw themselves into the slash of red.

The Second Sword of Light.

At first, the Genyosha stood up to the onslaught. But as precious minutes passed the crimson line began to bend. Benton's eyes marked a lance of light machines on the Genyosha right flank that had drifted a little farther back than the rest of the line.

The gap continued to widen.

Benton's gaze darted to a street map. The Genyosha lance was backing down along *Oike-dori*. The street diverged from the main axis of the retreat. Unless the light machines moved left along a cross street, they were exposed.

Apparently the Sworders had figured that out, too.

As Benton watched, six medium machines raced toward the gap in the Genyosha line. Enough firepower to quickly crush the light machines and then pivot and roll-up the Genyosha's right flank.

Benton punched up the presets again, stopping on camera five.

This time he saw something interesting. An ash-gray *Panther* backing toward the camera's pickup.

A flat red *Komodo* driving the light 'Mech back with its lasers.

Benton felt the rumble of the approaching machines in his bones.

He pulled up preset six.

Nothing.

The thunder of approaching BattleMechs grew more insistent, now accompanied by the shrill whine of lasers and the rippling explosions of missiles.

The Genyosha *Panther* appeared on his screen. This shot was a side view. Ugly black wounds scarred the 'Mech's Maxmillian 42 armor. Benton saw the articulation of a titanium femur in the *Panther's* right leg.

Time was running out on the light machine and its brave pilot.

He worked through his presets again before settling back on six again. The same kind of mismatch was taking place at all the intersections.

"Sabre One, this is Sabre Two," said Jasmine Rubach, an edge in her voice. Their comms line had been hard-wired 'Mech to 'Mech, same as the video pickups, so there was no need for radio silence.

"Wait for it, *Chu-i*," he snapped just as the *Komodo* stepped into the shot.

He watched the medium 'Mech work its heat load, first hitting the *Panther* with a quintet of medium lasers, then following with the large laser in its left arm. Then taking a step forward.

Faster, he thought. *Faster, damn you.*

The *Komodo* took another step.

And Benton saw a flash of the great machine's red back.

"All Sabres, Sabre One," he roared, "ATTACK."

Quickly bringing his machine up to full power, he lumbered toward the warehouse wall, punching through the thin, corrugated steel and emerging into bright sunlight.

He dropped his reticle over the medium's back. It flashed gold as soon as he cleared the warehouse.

And then his cockpit was filled with the whipcrack of particle projection cannons. Violet lightning burned into the Swordsman's back.

The *Komodo* stumbled forward, steadied itself with a step. Pivoted.

The *Panther* lashed into the Swordsman with his own PPC, followed by a flight of SRMs. Then the damaged Genyosha machine ducked behind a parking garage.

Good, thought Benton. Snipe at him from behind.

He hit his foot pedals, igniting his Icarus jump jets just as ruby light flashed through the space Benton had occupied a second before.

He came down firing his PPCs, deliberately carving up the armor that shielded the low, flat cockpit that extended from the *Komodo's* torso.

The *Panther* stepped out from behind the garage and put another flight of missiles into the *Komodo's* weakened rear armor. The Swordsman machine shuddered with the blow.

The SRMs were precious, but Benton had to hand it to the *Panther's* pilot—he was making them count.

The *Komodo* tracked his fall with its lasers, melting armor from the Omni's legs until it ran like water. Benton came down hard enough to rattle his teeth in his skull and force the breath from his body.

But he did not fall.

He dropped his reticle over the steel gray Kurita dragon right above the cockpit. Two bolts of man-made lightning gouged deep runnels in the already damaged armor.

Focused on the heavy machine headhunting him from the front, the *Komodo* pilot forgot about the light 'Mech behind him.

The *Panther* stepped out and pounded *another* salvo of SRMs into the *Komodo's* back, followed by a blast from its PPC.

The Sworder machine spasmed, a sure sign of gyroscope damage. The pilot punched out just before the *Komodo* toppled forward. The forty-five-ton 'Mech hit with enough force to shake the earth under the great feet of the *Black Hawk*.

Benton's temperature alarm was keening. He drew a breath of superheated air and reached over, slapped the override.

He stalked his *Black Hawk* over to where the pilot lay on the ground, still strapped to his command couch. Benton flicked on his external speakers. "Hear my words, Steel Dragon. I have a message for the *Kokoryu-kai*."

Then he raised his 'Mech's right foot and brought it down with all the force of his machine's sixty tons.

Benton stepped back, leaving nothing behind but the flattened wreckage of mangled steel and a smear of red.

Only when he heard the low, savage "*hai*," picked up by the *Panther* pilot's voice activated mic, did he realize the Genyosha pilot had watched the whole thing.

Benton smiled grimly. The Black Dragons wanted a return to tradition? Today they would have all of the tradition they could stomach.

Instead of outnumbering the retreating Genyosha, it was the Sworders that were outnumbered better than two to one. And once these traitors were disposed of, Sorenson's Sabres would pivot and attack the Sworder's left. It would be the Black Dragons that would be flanked.

And then Benton saw a flicker of motion in his rear monitor. He glanced down.

Something moved behind him, two, three blocks down, a sleek, fast design that looked a little like a carnivorous dinosaur wearing wraparound sunglasses.

And it was bone white.

Nexus. And behind it a *Blue Flame*. And behind *that*, a *Grand Titan*.

Blinding Light had come to call.

And just like that all the careful planning and the heartbreaking courage of the retreating Genyosha lance was wasted. They had the perfect opportunity to smash the Second Sword of Light.

But Benton didn't dare attack with Word of Blake at his back.

He reached down and toggled his comms frequency. "All Sabres, Sabre One. Fall back. Fall back, *now*." He closed his eyes. "Fighting withdrawal."

The words tasted like filth in his mouth.

Yaginuma Happy Sweet Warehouse Number Six Imperial City, Luthien

Benton stalked his *Black Hawk* toward a commercial building painted scrub white. There was a logo on the side of the building: a wheat-colored circle for a child's face, a half-moon smile, eyes closed in pleasure—the logo of Yaginuma Happy Sweet, the biggest sugar processor in the Combine. A giant roll-up door opened as Benton approached.

What was inside had nothing to do with sweets.

He stepped into one of the hidden *Otomo* armories sprinkled throughout Imperial City. Their location was unknown to members of the regular DCMS, a precaution that Benton had always thought ridiculous.

Until recently.

This one housed the Sabre's command lance. He saw Grace Shiro's flat red *Jenner* with its silver head and Mark's *Grand Dragon*. Hohiro's *Hunchback* was still missing. Benton felt a stab of worry.

He stepped his *Hawk* into its alcove and powered down. Warily he pushed his way out of the Omni's cockpit and took the gantry elevator down.

Kashira Karin McCarthy was waiting for him at the end of his journey. She was a rail thin woman in her early forties, dressed in stained blue coveralls. McCarthy had sewn a patch over the left breast of the coveralls: the Sabres' emblem: a flaming scimitar over a mushroom cloud. She was a plain woman: mousy brown hair cut short, a spray of freckles across her pale skin, muddy brown eyes.

She was also a genius.

McCarthy bowed respectfully. "Good evening, Benton-*sama*."

Benton bowed in return. "McCarthy-*san*. How is the best technician on Luthien this afternoon?"

She shook her head. "I'd be better if your MechWarrior's managed to bring my machines back. Where's my *Hunchback*?"

"I am sure *Busosenshi* Utsonomiya will return it to you with apologies for the delay."

She snorted. "He'd better." She glanced up. "It looks like you didn't treat Striker too badly. For a change."

Benton tasted something sour. He'd managed to pull his machine out of the battle almost before it had begun. "*Hai*," was all he said.

He glanced up at his *Black Hawk* with its twin PPCs. He preferred to pilot the F variant, but spare parts and weapon load outs had grown scarce on Luthien. Especially since LAW went up in a mushroom cloud in '68. Part of the reason his company was fielding ten 'Mechs instead of twelve. And why Striker was walking around as a BHKU-OA.

"I don't suppose there might be an opportunity to upgrade?"

McCarthy frowned. "I'll see what I can do."

Benton sighed. It was her way of saying "no."

It was just as well. He had no right asking for an upgrade when other pilots were going out with ammunition half-loads.

"*Tai-i* Benton."

He turned and saw *Chu-sa* Nathan Garner, the Genyosha commander striding toward him. Garner was a tall man with fair skin and hazel eyes. Garner had always been known for his ready smile and his penchant for devious practical jokes. But that had been before.

That part of Garner had been burned away by the treacherous nuclear detonation that had taken *Tai-sa* Shih Chou from the Genyosha. Since Garner assumed command he had grown tense and angry, twisted and coiled, like a spring carrying too great a load and slowly deforming under the stress.

War was filled with all kinds of casualties, some more difficult to recognize than others.

"You failed to execute the ambush, *Tai-i* Benton," Garner said coldly.

Benton shook his head. "I had Word of Blake moving in from the southwest. "

"You do not understand, *Tai-i*. We will not get this opportunity again. This was a chance to deal a grievous blow to the Black Dragon and now it is *gone*. Or do you imagine the Second Sword of Light will fall for the same trick a second time?"

“My people were trapped between hammer and anvil,” said Benton quietly. He glanced at Utsonomiya’s empty alcove. “Some have still not returned.”

“You should have held,” said Garner bitterly.

Benton came to attention. “I would have gladly spent my life and the lives of my people to purchase a victory. Is the *Chu-sa* suggesting I should have spent those lives to bring about defeat?”

Garner’s eyes narrowed. “A true samurai understands that honor *is* sacrifice.”

Benton swallowed and drew his *wakizashi*. He knelt on the ferro-concrete deck and bowed his head, aware of a sudden startled silence in the hangar. He placed his left hand behind his back and, gripping the blade of the knife, held it out to Garner. “I offer the *Chu-sa* whatever sacrifice he feels is required.”

Garner snatched the weapon from his hand.

Benton felt light-headed. He placed his right hand in the palm of his left and drew a deep breath into himself.

And held it.

Waiting for the moment of incandescent pain and disgrace that *Bushido* demanded.

He jumped when the blade clattered to the ground. “*Tai-i* Sorenson would not have failed me,” said Garner in a low, bitter voice.

Benton closed his eyes.

Garner’s words cut him more deeply than the blade ever could.

Mule-Class DropShip Bigby's Lady En Route To Luthien

Adept Rebecca Kitter shifted her weight one more time, uncomfortable even under the half-gee acceleration. *Bigby's Lady* was the eighth ship she'd inspected this watch. She was also the rank-est. The ship somehow managed to smell of sweat and machine oil and cow shit all at the same time.

The *Lady* was the kind of vessel that couldn't afford to be too choosy about her cargoes. This time around she was delivering winter wheat from Kilmarnock. Kitter could hear the rats skittering among the bags of grain.

She shuddered. It would have been easier to close the system to all traffic.

But Luthien had to eat.

So officers like Kitter had to inspect DropShips to make sure no contraband got in or out.

It was an impossible task. Luthien was a world of billions of workers and zero farmers. That meant the ag shipments never stopped. Word of Blake weren't equipped to conduct a full-scale blockade. The best they could do was keep out the big stuff.

Like BattleMechs.

So Kitter stepped into the *Mule's* cargo hold, striding down the rows that separated the pallets of grain bags, her sharp eyes looking for some form of deception.

She found none.

Unless the crew of the *Lady* had disassembled the great machines into pieces small enough to fit into a fifty-kilo bag of grain, there were no 'Mechs here.

She reached a bulkhead and stopped, drew a deep breath. It was hot in the bay, thirty-five degrees at least and it smelled bad. She wiped her forearm across her eyes. Then she opened them again.

Something felt wrong.

She blinked. Cargo ships carried all kinds of material handling equipment: tugs and forklifts all the way up through loader 'Mechs on the really big vessels. During transit, such equipment had to be

tied down. But the clamp she was looking at now was entirely too big for anything the *Lady* might legitimately be carrying.

It was 'Mech-sized.

She glanced up. Seven meters off the deck was a second massive clamp. Perfect for locking down a humanoid 'Mech.

The clamps were covered with a heavy coating of rust—based on what she'd seen of the *Lady* it was possible that the clamps hadn't been used in a century. Still . . .

Kitter stepped forward and drew the laser pistol at her hip. She aimed it at the clamp and pulled the trigger.

The screech of her weapon filled the cargo bay. Ruby fire sparked off the clamp. She held the shot for a good twenty seconds until she felt the heat rolling off the metal. She drew a breath and leaned forward to examine her handiwork.

The laser had cut a three-centimeter gash in the clamp's surface.

Revealing more rust underneath.

Good.

Kitter took a few quick pictures anyway, than she strode back to speak with the *Lady's* first mate.

A dozen men and women waited for her just inside the cargo deck, leaning against boxes or bulkheads, a few sitting on the deck. Kitter took a picture for ROM to chew on later. She was always taking pictures.

The first mate, whose name was Robert Gunderson, was a short man with a prominent gut. He wore sky blue coveralls that had never seen a spot of grease. "What was that sound?" he demanded, though his pallor told Kitter he already knew the answer to that question.

"Just a tool of the trade," said Kitter.

Gunderson scowled. "Are you finished? We have deliveries to make."

Kitter examined the faces around her. Twelve men and women out of a crew of twenty. Between engineering and the bridge there would be three or four people on watch. That meant there

were still a few crew unaccounted for. “Where’s the rest of your people?”

Gunderson sighed. “We had a engineering casualty. Lost Number Two Scrubber. The snipes are belowdecks trying to bring it back up.”

Which made sense. A bucket like this probably had round-the-clock problems. Kitter was behind schedule, and she was certain this tub couldn’t be smuggling anything. She should move on to the next dropper.

Except...

Except something just didn’t *feel* right.

“Maybe I should speak with the captain.”

Out of the corner of her eye Kitter saw a man and a woman share a look.

Gunderson turned red. “I really don’t see—”

“Now,” snapped Kitter.

Unhappily, he turned and led her to a hatch labeled: “Captain Darius Bigby.”

“Open it,” she said tightly.

“Listen,” said Gunderson, “the Captain is the kind of man who—”

Kitter jerked the rocker arm off the striker plate and shouldered the hatch open. She stepped into a darkness only alleviated by a tongue of light from the passageway behind her.

She smelled hashish and alcohol and a funky, human smell. A man and woman lay in a bed, both obviously naked. The man sat up in the darkness. “What da’ hell’s goin’ on?” he asked, his voice slurred.

She turned and stepped out of the Captain’s grubby little den of iniquity. Gunderson looked distinctly embarrassed.

She happened to glance right and saw one of the engineers watching her from down the passageway. He was disgusting: his orange coveralls were thoroughly stained with oil, he was obese (the coveralls were the size of a small tent), stubble shadowed his double chin, and a smear of grease marked his face.

Demi-Precentor Hu chose that exact moment to contact her. His irritated voice emerged from her comm. “Holy *Blake*, Kitter. Are you conducting an inspection or are you trying to enlist?”

She raised the device to her lips and pressed the send button. “I’m coming, sir.” She glanced at the disgusting engineer. “There’s nothing here.”

Graceful Crane Tea Room

The Graceful Crane was an elegant name, but Benton liked the teahouse for its ambience, or more correctly, it's *lack* of ambience. It was a hole in the wall catering to the dregs of Combine society. Yakuza looked down on these people. *Eta* looked down on these people. It was a place where citizens sold drugs or weapons or themselves. Benton was probably the only customer who actually came for the tea.

He liked the Graceful Crane because here no one would recognize a soldier of the Combine, at least not one who'd traded his MechWarrior togs for blue jeans and a khaki work shirt. Benton always drank green tea when he came to this place, and this time was no exception.

But his hands shook when he lifted the ceramic cup to his lips.

He closed his eyes and gently set the tea back down. He had served his master as well as he was able. And when he'd failed his master's expectations, he had offered his life.

What the hell should he have done differently?

(What would you have done, Daniel?)

Part of him recognized that Garner's anger wasn't really directed at Benton, but at himself. Luthien was beset by traitors on one side and invaders on the other. The Davions had attacked them and the Nova Cats had abandoned them. Worlds of the Combine—whole *worlds*—were sick and dying, infected by unknown plagues.

Theodore Kurita was dead.

How could one not consider these facts and a thousand more just like them and not think *The Dragon is dying?*

And that was why Garner was angry. Because his thoughts had turned to treason and he didn't know how to turn them back. Benton was certain this was how Garner felt.

Because it was how *he* felt.

He opened his eyes, intending a careful sip of his green tea. Instead, he jumped.

A man had slipped into the seat across from him. He looked to be from Arkab, with skin the soft color of oak. His eyes were a

brown so dark they looked black in the dim light of the teahouse and they were hooded, suggesting the man was sleepy, though a tingle at the back of his neck told Benton that nothing could be farther from the truth. The man was old, his face well weathered by the long passage of time. But there was nothing frail about him.

Nothing at all.

Benton could feel the danger radiating off the man in waves. But it wasn't an obvious danger. It was subtle.

That alone proved this man didn't belong here.

Very carefully, Benton set aside his tea.

"I come here on behalf of the Dragon," said the strange man.

"Really?" said Benton. "And which coordinator would that be? Hohiro? Minamoto?" He paused. "Theodore?"

"I did not say the Coordinator," said the man. "I said the Dragon."

"And what would be the difference?" said Benton, a tone of menace slipping into his voice.

"My master doesn't care about politics," said the man primly.

Benton snorted. "I didn't know you could get to be a master without caring about politics." He took a sip of tea to show his indifference, even though his muscles were stiff with tension. "What *does* your master care about?"

"The Yellow Bird."

"The Yellow Bird? And who would that be? The Black Dragons? Word of Blake? Duke Sandoval? Thomas Marik? Kiyomori Minamoto? Surely you have a candidate."

The man's dark eyes bored into him. "You already know the answer to that question, *Tai-i*," he said softly.

He knows who I am. "Who are you?"

The man stared at him for a long moment. "You may call me . . . Peter," he said, "if it pleases you."

Benton shook his head. "What kind of answer is that?"

The man smiled, a flash of white against leathery skin. “The only kind you are likely to get.”

“What do you want... Peter?”

“My master has great respect for Sorenson’s Sabres. He wishes to offer you the opportunity to destroy the Yellow Bird.”

“I already serve the Dragon,” said Benton tightly.

“*lie, Tai-i.* You follow orders. It is not the same thing.”

Benton opened his mouth and closed it again. “I fight the Black Dragons.”

“The Black Dragons are traitors and cowards. They are worthy only of bloody, dishonorable deaths.” Peter leaned forward, his black eyes blazing with fury. “But not today.”

Benton slammed his fist on the table. “*I fight for Luthien.*”

“Yes,” said the other man coldly. “But will you fight for *the Dragon?*”

And then he reached across the table and slapped the cup of tea, sending it careening into the careless arms of gravity. It hit the floor and shattered into a thousand pieces. Benton’s eyes followed the motion of the cup, only for a second.

But when he looked up the strange, old man was gone.

Word of Blake Camp Alpha Imperial City, Luthien

Precentor Alice Phuong felt the reins of history slipping from her grasp. Word of Blake was devoted to humanity's salvation. Indeed, they had landed on Luthien to save a loyal ally as a reward for fighting to preserve the Star League.

She closed her eyes and drew a heavy breath.

Somehow, *somehow*, their devotion had been transmuted into disaster. Here and across the Inner Sphere. How had the forces of evil managed to portray the white hats as the bad guys?

She opened her eyes and picked up a data chip, steeling herself for another pointless task. She plugged the chip into a video display and watched pictures flash by on her wallscreen.

They were photos taken by the boarding parties. And what a waste of time *that* was. She didn't have the naval power to really blockade this system. The best she could hope to do was try to keep large forces of BattleMechs from reinforcing Luthien and even then—

She stopped the flicker of pictures and sat forward. She backed up six shots until she found the face that had caught her attention. The caption said the picture had been taken by an Adept Kitter aboard the DropShip *Bigby's Lady*.

She pressed a button that signaled the acolyte sitting outside her office. "Contact Adept Rebecca Kitter aboard *Sword of Promise*. I wish to speak with her at once. Here." She broke the connection before the acolyte even had time to acknowledge the order.

Her eyes fixed on the fat crewman in the background, the one that looked like he'd been cleaning out a servo mechanism from the inside.

Now why the hell did he look so familiar?

Cinema City, Luthien **23 December 3070**

Benton stepped his *Black Hawk* behind a massive soundstage and hit his jump jets, landing his machine just beyond the building's far corner.

He came down firing, PPCs ripping into a bone white *Red Shift*.

The light 'Mech slapped back with its twin pulse lasers, but it was no match for Benton's heavy and the Wobbie pilot knew it. He darted around the building's corner.

The *Shift* was capable of speeds of 151 kph. Benton's *Black Hawk* was never going to run the fleet little machine down.

A lopsided smile touched his lips. Time to rely on guile.

He punched through building's thin wall and crashed through elaborate naval sets that celebrated some ancient war between Japan and the United States of America. Benton smashed through a scattering of propeller-driven aircraft painted green with a red meatball on their sides, racing for the wide cargo opening at the building's north end.

He saw the *Shift* stalk past the open door, silhouetted by sunlight.

Benton pulled into his triggers.

A double strike of man-made lightning tore off one of the light 'Mech's legs. The *Shift* was trying to struggle up on its one remaining leg, no doubt desperately calling for help.

Benton didn't give a damn. He was taking *this* pilot out of the war. He fired again. Violet lightning melting the *Shift's* Star Stab armor, its head wreathed by sparks of secondary discharge.

The light 'Mech was on its back, desperately trying to drag itself back with its arms, like a man struggling against a crocodile pulling him down into the river by his legs.

Benton hit it again.

The *Shift* collapsed backwards.

The attack turned his cockpit into a blast furnace. Benton panted, struggling to breathe the suddenly superheated air. He stalked forward, fighting the heat-induced sluggishness in his machine.

He was almost on top of the crippled Word of Blake machine when he heard a roar of terrible destruction and a building a hundred meters to the north came down, revealing the chickenoid shape of a *Raijin II*.

Benton slammed his boots down on his foot pedals and the *Hawk* rose on a column of plasma, the *Raijin's* Blankenburg PPC and trio of Sunbeam lasers cutting lines of jeweled energy just inside the arc of his leap.

He came down on top of the *Red Shift's* cockpit with a cruel *crunch*.

Benton's *Hawk* stumbled forward just as a flight of Holly Streaks flashed past him.

He tore into the *Raijin II* with his PPCs.

Benton liked his chances against the Wobbie machine. The *Raijin* gave up ten tons to his *Black Hawk*, and although its triple strength myomer made it nearly half-again as fast as Benton's heavy, that advantage was largely countered by the buildings that dotted the *Eiga-toshi* sound lot.

Benton stutter-stepped right, narrowly avoiding most of the punch of those Sunbeam lasers, but taking a good wallop from a second flight of Streaks.

He hit back hard with his PPCs, burning through the weakened armor over the left torso. There was a heartbeat of silence and then the irregular firecracker *pop pop pop* of secondary explosions shattered that silence. CASE saved the *Raijin* pilot's life, but the explosion mangled his SRM launcher and took out one of the Sunbeams, probably a jump jet too, not to mention forcing an engine shutdown.

The advantage was rapidly tilting his way.

And then he heard the titanic rumble of something approaching.

A bone white *Albatross* turned the corner.

Benton didn't think. He pivoted and hit his jump jets, hopping towards the building with the naval sets just as a monsoon of laser fire swept down upon him. Over the whine of the lasers he heard the roar of the missiles and the death rattle of an Oriente LB 10-X.

His hop screwed up the Blakist's firing solution, taking him out of the way of most of it.

He still watched his rear armor blink from green to yellow to red in the few short moments his jump jets freed him from gravity's grasp.

Time to fall back.

Again.

He was tired of retreating with Word of Blake at his back.

And then another player stepped into the picture. An *Atlas*. This machine was painted the same flat red as Benton's *Black Hawk*.

But the steel dragon on its chest told him it was no ally.

At that moment, Benton knew he was going to die.

He was surprised to find the thought did not trouble him. It would be a warrior's death, his life given in service to the Dragon.

And he knew just how he was going to spend it.

He pivoted toward the *Kokoryu-kai* 'Mech and crouched, preparing himself for a death-from-above attack.

Except in that same moment, the *Albatross* turned and attacked the *Atlas* with everything it had.

Benton stared at the scene, his jaw hanging slackly open, his mind not believing what his eyes were telling him, so surprised and disgusted at the turn of events that it was a full fifteen seconds before he realized he could fall back to safety through the soundstage.

Word of Blake Camp Alpha Imperial City, Luthien

Rebecca Kitter stood at attention before Precentor Alice Phuong's polished granite desk, desperately pouring over everything she had done in the last few days, trying to understand what she'd done wrong. Precentors didn't summon adepts down from orbit for friendly chats and the elegant Asian woman's face showed absolutely no emotion. It was obvious Kitter was guilty of a major screw-up.

She just couldn't figure out what it was.

"Do you remember the *Bigby's Lady*?" Phuong asked in a measured, precise voice.

Kitter blinked, trying to place the name. Then... *The pig sty*. "She was a *Mule*, Precentor. Carrying agricultural products."

Phuong raised one dark eyebrow. "Agricultural products?"

Kitter opened her mouth to answer the unspoken accusation and then suddenly remembered the *clamps*. She was suddenly very cold. "The *Mule* had been modified to carry 'Mechs," she said. "But the clamps were rusted through. And there was no place to hide a 'Mech. I didn't think—"

"This isn't about the clamps," said Phuong softly.

Kitter shook her head in confusion. "Then I don't—"

"I have a joke for you, Adept. Perhaps you've heard it before."

Kitter blinked. "Ma'am?"

"Every day a laborer crosses the border with a wheelbarrow full of bricks, and every day the border guard stops him. He inspects the bricks, hefting them, breaking them apart, sometimes even pulling them out of the wheelbarrow, one by one. But no matter how hard he looks he can never find anything wrong.

"This happens day after day for twenty years. Finally the guard retires. And because he has to know, he asks the laborer what he's been smuggling all that time. Do you know what the laborer said?"

Kitter shook her head.

“Wheelbarrows,” said Phuong coldly.

She leaned across her desk and touched a button. “Meet *our* wheelbarrow.” A picture appeared on the wall screen. It showed a crewman from the *Lady*, fat and covered with grease. The engineer had been cropped from the original picture and blown up, so his features were blurry.

“Do you know who this man is?” Phuong asked.

Kitter shook her head helplessly.

“Well, fortunately ROM is somewhat more resourceful.”

“Who is it?” Kitter asked, afraid of the answer.

The Precentor sat back in her fine leather chair.

And then she spoke.

When Kitter heard the name, her legs suddenly felt shaky, and she had to reach out and place a hand on that fine granite desk to steady herself.

Sanjo-dori *Imperial City, Luthien*

Sanjo-dori was an industrial street. It had to be, to effectively conceal the true nature of Yaginuma Happy Sweet Warehouse Number Six. There had to be many businesses supporting a steady flow of trucks and supplies and technical people, so when military supplies trickled in it looked like business as usual.

This late in the game, Benton doubted the warehouse location was still a secret, but that was the idea.

So when he strolled down *Sanjo-dori* for the pleasure of the cool night air on his face, he walked by factories and warehouses. There were no homes, no shops. But factories required workers.

And so there were bars. And dark, dirty places where belongings could be traded for money. And women of the water trade.

On this night, Benton didn't care. He was happy for any distraction, he told himself, and so his mind found its way back to the very subject it was trying to avoid.

He clenched his jaw. Another inconclusive battle.

Is that really what's making you so angry, Albert? he asked himself.

Or is that you had finally found an honorable exit from this hell and Word of Blake cheated you out of it?

He balled his hands into fists.

And right then he felt something hard and unyielding press itself into the small of his back. Something very much like the barrel of a slug thrower.

"Do you plan to merely kill me?" Benton asked in an even voice. "Or are you planning to disgrace me?"

"I hope you won't force me to do either," said a familiar voice. "But then the choice is really up to you. Keep walking, *kudasai*."

So the man who called himself only "Peter" had turned out to actually be dangerous, as well as eccentric. Benton remembered his sudden disappearance in the teahouse. He didn't believe he could duck away from this man without being shot.

“What do you want?” Benton asked.

“My master wishes to speak with you.”

“And who would he be?”

Peter said nothing.

“Where are we going?”

“The Lucky Green Dog,” said Peter, making his first mistake.

Because Benton could clearly see the neon green outline of a dog flashing fifteen meters down the street. Benton was not going through the door to that bar. Once he was off the street, they had him.

They were approaching the door to another bar. It was open to allow the cool night air in. Benton could hear the laughter and the clinking of glasses floating into the night. This was his moment.

He drew a deep breath. Held it.

And at the right moment he dove for the ground, rolled, and sprang for the door.

He was up in an instant, half turning to strike Peter as he rushed through the door after him.

Only, Peter didn't come.

Instead he heard the unnerving sound of a pump-action shot gun's action. The whine of a hand laser. The click of a round being chambered. Benton swallowed.

“He wasn't really taking me to the Lucky Green Dog, was he?” he said.

He heard the sound of glorious, jovial laughter. No one could hear that laughter and not believe its owner was filled with joy. “No, indeed, *Tai-i.*”

Benton slowly turned. A dozen men held weapons on him. At their center sat a man at a table, a bottle of sake before him.

If Adept Rebecca Kitter of the Word of Blake Militia had seen this man, she would have recognized him as the engineer she'd glanced as she stumbled out of Captain Bigby's quarters. But cleaned up and dressed in a kimono of fine black silk, a mischievous smile curled across his round, fat face, Benton recognized this man for who he really was.

"Chandrasekhar Kurita," he whispered.

* * *

"So good to finally meet you, my boy." Kurita bowed from the waist, a move of considerable grace for a man of his bulk.

Benton automatically returned the bow. "You are Peter's master."

"I am the *Mirza* Peter Abdulsattah's master, *hai*." The large man gestured at a table. "*Kudasai*, my young friend, sit."

Benton glided forward, dazed. "What do you want with me?"

"A great deal." The large man poured a swallow of sake in a small glass and shoved it across the table.

Benton hesitated, then took the drink and gulped it down. It tasted like fire, but somehow it brought back to himself a little.

"I have a mission for you, *Tai-i*."

"*So ka?* A mission? For *me?*"

"The Yellow Bird has come to roost," said Kurita.

"And the Dragon is imperiled," said Benton. "It seems I heard this speech once before."

Kurita shook his head. "*lie*. The Dragon is merely an *appetizer*. This birds covets the entire Inner Sphere. And it will not stop until it has cracked open all our bones and feasted on the marrow."

Benton thought of how casually Blinding Light had stolen his warrior's death. How they'd inserted themselves into the middle of the samurai's duel for their own interests. "Word of Blake," he whispered.

Kurita nodded. "*Hai*."

The large man drew a deep breath. "I am assembling a task force of the proudest house and mercenary commands drawn from across the Inner Sphere. This task force has one mission. Attack Word of Blake." Kurita leaned forward and closed his right hand into a fist. His face stretched into a feral smile. "We will *crush* them."

And then the moment seemed to fade just as quickly as it had come. Kurita leaned backward in his chair. “*Tai-i* Benton, we need Sorenson’s Sabres.”

“Is that an order?”

Kurita licked his lips. “I am not the Coordinator. There are enough applicants for *that* job,” he said darkly. He shook his head. “I cannot give you an order. Instead I *implore* you. Serve the Dragon not just with your bravery and loyalty, but also with your insight.”

“But the Black Dragons are—”

Kurita snorted. “The Black Dragons.” He dismissed them with a wave of his hand “They are scum. They shall pay in blood, *after* the Yellow Bird had been brought down.”

“But they rape *Luthien*,” snarled Benton.

“*Luthien*,” Kurita whispered reverently. “The black pearl of Combine is a world of unsurpassing beauty and history.” He slammed his fist against the table and roared: “But it is *not* the Dragon.”

“My orders—”

“Do not speak to me of *orders*, Albert Benton-*san*. Who is left to give you orders? A military command riddled with traitors? Whichever officer commands the Genyosha? Which banner do you follow, *Tai-i*?”

“|—”

Kurita’s eyes narrowed. “Or is it that you have followed so long, you do not know what it means to truly lead?”

Benton opened his mouth to answer and then closed it again. “If you find me unworthy, then why do you want me so badly?”

Kurita stared at him for a long moment. Then he slowly shook his head. “No man finds you unworthy, *Tai-i*. Except, possibly, yourself.”

“But Daniel Sorenson would never have—”

“Daniel Sorenson is *dead*,” Kurita snapped. “He was a great warrior, but he is *gone*. The ghost of Sorenson you have conjured to torture yourself cannot lead men and women into battle. Only *you* can do that.”

Benton shook his head. "I cannot. I cannot order the Sabres to abandon this world. To abandon *Luthien*."

"Is that because you believe remaining here is in the best interest of the Combine?" asked Kurita coldly. "Or is that because you don't have the courage to make the right decision."

Benton suddenly found himself on his feet, his hands clenched into fists. A dozen weapons came up at once, suddenly trained on him.

"Hold," Kurita shouted.

Slowly his retainers lowered their weapons.

Kurita placed a datachip in Benton's hand. "This explains how we will get you off the planet."

Benton shook his head. "I don't—"

"Keep it," said Kurita. "If for no other reason than to persuade the ISF of my treachery."

Benton licked his lips. "I didn't mean that."

Kurita leaned in and placed his hand on Benton's shoulder. "I will not try to force your hand, *Tai-i*. I know your character is such that you would never willingly abandon your duty. But I suggest you meditate on the nature of courage. Any fool may face death. The Dragon requires servants who would place their very honor at risk in its service."

**Northern Palace District
Imperial City, Luthien
26 December 3070**

Benton stalked Striker down *Shijo-dori*, a main street that led to the heart of the palace district.

And the Black Dragon.

Chu-sa Garner was feinting with the Sabres. When the Second Sword bit on the feint, the Genyosha would swing in and attack from the rear. But for the plan to work, Benton had to sell it.

So he moved his people a street at a time, fast but careful, as if this really were the sneak attack it was supposed to look like.

He anchored the right side of the line, with Grace's *Jenner* to his left. Beyond her and the rest of the command lance, the fire lance held down the left end, the pursuit lance dropped back where he could quickly bring them up to plug a hole.

Benton moved toward the intersection where *Gojo-dori* crossed *Shijo*.

He leaned forward into *Gojo* and saw Grace's *Jenner* step into the intersection a block down. Nothing else moved. Large swaths of the city had been abandoned, especially along the approaches to the palace.

Fighting in Imperial City was like brawling in a church: dangerous and strange and very *wrong*.

Benton looked right.

And saw a flat red *Black Hawk* peeking into the intersection a block over.

For a crazy moment, he thought he was seeing his own reflection in a glass-faced building. And then his eyes found the rearing Kurita dragon painted on the *Hawk's* cockpit.

A dragon the color of burnished steel.

Benton dropped his reticle down over the enemy machine. The targeting bug flashed gold and Benton pulled into his triggers, spearing the Sworder's Ultra AC/5 with twin spikes of violet light-

ning, shattering armor. The Sworder machine staggered under the force of the blow and then hit back with its large pulse laser.

Benton hit his jump jets in time to avoid most of the enemy fire, but he was resigned to a brutal test. The Sworder machine was nearly the twin of his own, and the pilot was not unskilled.

“Sabre One. *Black Hawk* Bravo.”

“Sabre Two,” answered *Chu-i* Dana Utsonomiya’s calm voice. “*Dragon* and *Ninja-To*.” He sounded concerned, but steady. “They’re boiling out of the woodwork now, *Tai-i*.”

Benton glanced left, saw Grace taking heavy fire and hitting back with her PPCs. He hit his jump jets, but not before his legs took a pounding from the other *Hawk*’s autocannon.

“I have a full lance of—” Utsonomiya began.

He was cut off by Jasmine Rubach’s frantic voice. “Sabre Three. Visual sighting of Blinding Light assembling on your right flank.”

Benton swore under his breath as he paid the autocannon back with his PPCs.

“Are they attacking, Sabre Three?” he snapped.

“*lie, Tai-i*.” Jasmine sounded puzzled. “They appear to be...assembling.”

That didn’t puzzle Benton at all.

The Black Dragons and the loyal Combine forces were engaged in a brutal slugfest, while Word of Blake waiting patiently to destroy the survivor and win Luthien.

Win all the Inner Sphere.

The Yellow Bird was strong, *hai*. But worse than that, it was clever.

Benton’s eyes locked on the *Black Hawk* he faced. “Did you start out as a traitor?” He whispered. “Or were you just too weak to disobey orders you knew were wrong?”

The enemy pilot offered no answer but the pounding of his autocannon and the deadly ruby stitching of his pulse laser.

“All Sabres, Sabre One.” Benton swallowed. “Fighting withdrawal.”

Utsonomiya's surprise carried over the lance leader channel. "So ka?" Then the officer got himself under control. "Arigato, Tai-i. But my lance can hold for another few min—"

"You have your orders, *Chu-i*," said Benton sharply.

"But, *Tai-i*," said Rubach, "the plan is to pin the Sworders in place until the Genyosha can work into position."

Benton drew a deep breath. He was not Daniel Sorenson. He could never be. He shouldn't even try. But he would follow Sorenson's example in one manner. Daniel had always gone his own way.

And so would Benton.

He would begin by taking his command to Chandrasekhar Kurita's waiting DropShips.

"Do not worry, *Chu-i* Rubach," said Benton. "There is a new plan."