

Tides of Breathing

The setting sun casts long shadows across an abandoned stretch of highway.

The concrete is mostly intact, just crisscrossed with the first few weeds breaking through. A single abandoned sedan sits angled across the faded yellow line, windows long since broken out. The sides of the highway are lined with overgrown fields and a few dilapidated buildings.

A gentle wind stirs the weedy fields, then fades.

The stillness is broken by a sudden movement from the side of the road. A hulking figure emerges from the brush, moving in smooth robotic steps. The figure is covered in mechanical armor, dents and creases marring its camouflage.

The figure places its gauntlets against the sedan, and with a quiet whine of servos begins shoving it off the road. A squeal breaks the calm of the scene and the rotten tires leave a black trail to the shoulder. In a final cloud of dust, the sedan slides off the slope of the road and comes to a stop. The figure looks up and down the road calmly, then slides back in an overgrown field and vanishes.

Riku-Lieutenant Takeshi settles back into the dirt. The joint in his left arm is still creased from an AK round, it grates as he adjusts himself. He flicks open the bullet proof panel on his forearm, exposing the small touchscreen.

He keys open the encrypted channel and speaks in clipped Japanese. "*Daimyo*, this is *Daitō* Five. Extraction secure."

A double chirp is his only response.

Takeshi can't see the rest of his team, but four beacons glow blue on his HUD, a loose circle around the highway.

The plane appears moments later as a glint of blue just above the tree line, not quite matching the sky. It's small and sleek, likely designed to be some rich fools toy. Not that even the richest fools could afford to fly these days...

The plane circles once then swings low for a landing. It bounces down, and the engine noise fades to a dull whine as it executes a jerky turn, lining up for take off.

Takeshi rises from the field and jogs onto the pavement. He passes in front of the cockpit, giving a sketched salute to the pilots without looking up. The door flops down, steel steps bolted to the back. Takeshi takes a knee to one side of the steps, and gives a quick scan. He flips his wrist screen open again. A few taps and the first of his men begins moving.

The armored man emerges from the side of the highway, armor indistinguishable from Takeshi's other than the battle damage creating a different pattern over the camouflage. His over-sized rifle is held tight in his left hand. His right arm is bent and locked against his chest by his armor. A jagged tear shows where a bullet had found its way through the armor and shattered the arm within. Only the built in tourniquet is keeping him from bleeding out. With a barely perceptible nod of the helmet the man jumps up the stairs, then twists to fit his bulk through the narrow door.

Takeshi recalls his men one by one, and they stream by him into the plane. Each bears the marks of battle. The Americans may be war-mongering barbarians, but at least they were good at it.

With a final sweep of his head he become the last of his team to climb onto the plane, pulling the door shut behind him.

Whatever luxury used to line the inside of the plane as been gutted. Instead hard steel benches line each side. That's fine, cushions would be wasted on their metallic rears.

Even gutted, the interior of the plane is cramped for the soldiers. His four men sit facing each other, four helmeted heads almost touching in the center. Takeshi sits next to them, facing an empty seat.

Takeshi closes his eyes rather than look at it.

The jets are already ramping up, and the plane lurches into the air. Takeshi turns down the volume on his helmet, leaving the sound of the engines at a dull whine.

The steady vibration lulls Takeshi and soon he finds himself back in the forest as the first bullets were fired. While his men snapped their weapons up and return fire, he opened his wrist screen, tapping instructions.

The Americans were unprepared for the violence the armored men bring. When they take cover behind barricades, Takeshi sends his armored men to leap high, raining down fire and crushing skulls under steel boots when they land.

But the slaughter hadn't been one sided. As the American's had tried to escape, Takeshi sent his fastest, Shirou Satou after them. Satou had not hesitated, even as the heavy guns peppered the ground around him, rushing toward death like a homecoming...

Takeshi jerks awake, still on the plane. To his side, his men doze. Across from him is an empty seat. Satou should be sitting there. The rounds had taken him in the groin, too high for the built in tourniquets to help.

For a moment Takeshi's eyes feel gritty and he is thankful for the opaque visor.

He remembers dragging Satou's body from the battle zone, stripping his armor of weapons and useful gear. He had set the thermal charges as his men stood in a circle, facing outwards. Even during a moment like that, his men knew to keep 360 security.

As the charges had burned their way through the armor and the man, Takeshi had keyed the mic and recited in Japanese from memory.

"I have no home. I make awareness my home,

"I have no divine power. I make honesty my divine power.

"I have no enemy. I make carelessness my enemy.

"I have no armor. I make benevolence and righteousness my armor.

"I have no castle. I make immovable mind my castle

"I have no life and death. I make the tides of breathing my life and death.

"I have no sword. I make absence of self interest my sword."

The thermal charges burned themselves out, destroying the circuits of the armor, and leaving Satou a blackened husk.

Takeshi had fallen silent, listening to the faint hiss of the open channel, before keying it closed.

Hours later Takeshi is hung from his shoulders like a piece of meat on steel hooks. Technicians move around him, only coming up to his chest. One begins unclipping the first piece

of armor, the easily removable groin and rear that allow for mid mission relief. With clinical disinterest the technician wraps a *fundoshi* around Takeshi's waist, covering his privates. Takeshi keeps his eyes ahead.

The rest of the scarred armor comes apart in steady pieces, revealing the pale unmarked skin below. It's piled on a stainless steel table like a discarded beetle carapace.

In the end, a step stool is slid under Takeshi's feet, and he steps clear of the remaining armor. For the first time in a month, he moves his limbs without the answering power of the suits servos.

From years of experience he knows not to move too quickly, so he simply stands, while the technicians eye him patiently. The first time he had emerged from his armor he had stumbled around like a new-born deer. The technicians were too professional to laugh, but that hadn't made it better.

The lead technician unclips the *tanto* from the back of the armor and holds it out to Takeshi with a small bow. With all the weaponry on the armor, the knife is meant more as symbol of Takeshi's leadership position than a weapon.

Even so, the blade is crusted with dried blood.

Takeshi returns the bow, accepting the knife. It's a small ritual just between the technicians and the armored men they serve. A way of saying he is home, and his honor is intact to retain his weapon.

It is awkwardly large in unarmored hands. Without any clothes to attach it to, Takeshi clasps it against his naked chest.

After hours in the sterile order of the military base Takeshi finds himself facing the outer wall. Above the concrete buttress he sees skyscrapers crowding overhead, fading into the haze of pollution. Street vendors' frantic cries leak into the base. Takeshi's pulse quickens as a vehicle honks loudly nearby. He breaths deep, willing it to slow.

Takeshi moves restlessly under the civilian clothes. For the first time in months, he feels vulnerable. He touches the *tanto*, tucked into his waistband under his shirt. He thinks of his armor, in a basement right now, being cleaned and repaired.

He feels afraid.

The guard at the pedestrian gate offers a salute that matches his uniform in crispness, and pulls the door open. With a slow exhale, Takeshi steps into the bustle of the city.