

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE CRYPT OF DRACULA*

KANE GILMOUR



A
WIRBIRDS OF
MARS
SHORT STORY

THE **BITTER EDGE**

“The Bitter Edge”

A Warbirds of Mars Short Story

By Kane Gilmour

Description:

In this short story, which acts as a prequel to Scott P. ‘Doc’ Vaughn’s *Warbirds of Mars* concept (which has yielded a webcomic, radio podcasts, and an all-star prose anthology, with more on the way), we learn about the origins of the silent and deadly Martian Killer known in the series only as Mr. Mask. Long before he gained that name, the hybrid Martian/Human is struggling to survive in pre-war Japan, living off the land, and avoiding detection. But an old blind man discovers him, takes him home, and teaches him a trade, while subtly imparting lessons about life, identity, and family. Mask finally finds purpose in life, but the Martians are on their way to the quiet little home in the forest, and nothing will ever be the same.

“The Bitter Edge” is a 9,000-word short story (24 pages in print), and it was originally printed in the 2013 anthology *Warbirds of Mars: Stories of the Fight!*

INTRODUCTION

When my friend of twenty-three years, Scott P. ‘Doc’ Vaughn, first asked me to take a look at his concept for a world in which Earth was invaded by Martians before the end of World War II, it was with the understanding that if I liked it, I might write some scripts for him to illustrate. He was feeling itchy to try his hand at a new concept, but wanted someone else to handle the writing. Before we knew it, we had a popular webcomic and artists and writers asking us if we ever planned to open up the Warbirds sandbox to other creators.

In 2013 we put together an amazing anthology called *Warbirds of Mars: Stories of the Fight*, with fourteen prose short stories from spectacular established and up-and-coming authors, and with sixteen illustrations from an impressive group of professional illustrators and comic book artists. This short story, “The Bitter Edge,” was included in that anthology. The book received eleven nominations in multiple categories for the 2013 New Pulp Awards, and I’m pleased to say that “The Bitter Edge” was nominated as Best Short Story, too.

For those who may not have read any Warbirds of Mars yet, the story begins in 1944, when during the height of the fighting in Europe, aliens—generically referred to as ‘Martians’—invade Earth, prolonging WWII well in the 1950, and creating strange and unusual allegiances. Against this tapestry, once small band of resistance fighters gather together to dish out some pain on the three-eyed monsters. You can follow the story for free at the [Warbirds of Mars](#) webcomic site.

For now, all you need to know is that a mysterious man, who is clearly half-Human and half-Martian assists the team of resistance fighters, who come to be known as the ‘Martian Killers.’ He’s tall and mostly silent, and deadly with a rifle or a sword. But this short story takes place in pre-war Japan, when our hero was not yet the machine of death we see in the webcomic and the other stories in the anthology. He’s younger and still finding his way in the world, hiding the abominable sight of himself from the human world around him...

Join me now, for “The Bitter Edge,” and may you enjoy this Holiday Season!

—Kane Gilmour

THE BITTER EDGE

A cold wind ripped through the cherry tree branches, fluttering the light pink blossoms, and making the cloaked man uneasy. Still, he kept his crouched position on the low branch. He squatted on the thick bark, one hand clinging to the trunk, and the other holding the small knife he had found in a gardener's shed in the next village. His cloak dipped lower than the branch, but not lower than the blossoms dancing in the breeze.

Through the fragrant flowers, the cloaked man watched the old Japanese man's progress. Dressed in a traditional pleated black skirt and a crossed white blouse, the old man made his way along the dirt path. Soon the old man would be directly beneath the perch in the tree. The squatting form held his breath and waited, hoping he would not be detected. Behind him lay the forest, and the old man would likely travel on foot with his cane through the length of it, to the small pagoda on the other side of the wood. The forest was dense with pine and cherry blossom, but the path had been well traveled.

His grip on the bark tightened, as his lungs struggled to cope with the lack of oxygen, but he was afraid to make even the slightest noise, so he continued to hold his breath. The old man was clearly blind, and as a result, he might have excellent hearing.

You have no name, so you deserve no breath, he told himself.

The old man was nearly past the tree, when he grunted to himself. He took two more steps then stopped in the path, still facing the far side of the wood.

Damn.

The blind man took another two steps, then stopped again. When he spoke, it was in slow and measured Japanese—not as if he were speaking to a foreigner, but as if he were lecturing a pupil. His enunciation was perfect.

“If you were hoping to attack from your vantage in the trees, you missed your opportunity. I have passed the optimal point for you to leap.”

The cloaked man in the tree quickly debated with himself whether he should reply at all, confirming his presence. The old man could be guessing.

“Please. The cherry blossom is delightful at this time of year. Your stench is more akin to a garbage heap. I know you are there. If you do not plan to attack, why have you taken refuge in the tree?” The old man turned, smiled, and then tilted his head up to look directly at the crouched man, as if he were sighted after all.

The nameless man sighed in his tree. “I wish not to be seen.” His Japanese was sufficient for the old man to understand him, but his nature as a foreigner would be betrayed immediately by his inability to grasp the subtle complexities of the language.

“Please. Come down from your tree, and I promise I will not see you. I am blind, after all.” The man's playful smile either showed him to be a friendly soul or a deadly actor.

The nameless man made his decision. He turned and nimbly leapt down to the path, a drop of perhaps ten feet, but his landing was nearly noiseless. His soft brown cloak fluttered out behind him. He stood slowly and faced the old man.

“You hide because you are *Gaijin*?” the bald old man asked. His face was kindly and deeply tanned, resembling a rich leather. His mustache stretched long below his chin on both sides of his mouth, but was vacant below his nose. An equally long tuft of white hair sprouted from the man’s chin.

“No, Ojii-sama, I hide because I am disfigured.” The nameless man hung his head, as he used the formal term of respect for an elder. He knew enough of Japanese culture and enough about Japanese society from the time he had been in the islands to know that he would be shunned everywhere he went, because of his deformed face and unusual hands.

“For a *Gaijin*, you are very respectful, and have learned to speak my language very well. Come and walk with an old blind man. Your eyes clearly work well, and I may have use for them.” The man turned and began to walk down the path again, his gnarled and polished stick in hand.

The nameless man pulled the hood of his cloak up over his head and followed the kind old man.

As the deformed man had suspected, the old Japanese man lived in the first pagoda-like structure on the far edge of the wood. He had seen the building when hunting for deer the previous day. The woods sprawled for miles all around. He wondered how the man made due this far away from the village and with no sight.

“You encouraged me to attack you. What would you have done if I had been a threat?”

The old man smiled, but made no reply.

The inside of his home was a traditional Japanese setting. Thin mats covered the floors, and the walls were made from paper and wood, in simple but beautiful shapes and lines. The old man opened sliding doors that resembled panels on one wall, so that the side of the small home was completely open to the outdoors, with only the roof offering shelter from the elements.

“It is a very nice day, and the sun feels good on my face. Come help me make tea.” The old man led the way into a kitchen with surprisingly modern appliances—an icebox, a gas stove, and even electric lights. The cloaked man had not seen any electrical wires running to the home on his way in, and for that matter, he had seen precious few of them in this part of the empire. The Japanese man had not said anything to him about removing his shoes when they entered. The cloaked man wondered if the old blind man could somehow sense that he wore no shoes.

The old man paused and then turned to face him. “Perhaps, first you should bathe. I will handle the tea.”

The cloaked man exited the kitchen, and not knowing which way to go in the hallway, decided to simply explore. He turned left and checked the first door he came to. It led to a small room with a shrine. He backed out and slid the door closed. The next room was the bathroom, with a modern shower over a deep Japanese-style tub. Understanding that there would be water shortages with the Imperial army on the rampage through neighboring China, the cloaked man opted for the shower.

He shed his cloak, and the tattered clothes he wore underneath. He climbed into the deep tub and turned on the water. He was again surprised to discover hot water. The small pagoda-like home seemed old and traditional to the casual viewer, but it had all the modernity inside for which one could hope. As the steamy water washed away layers of dirt from his body, the man looked down at himself. His skin was covered in scars from the beatings he had received and from the torture done to him. His feet were heavily covered in calluses after so long without shoes. If he didn't look at his hands, he could believe he was completely human.

But the hands gave it away. He held them up to examine them in the water. Three long thick digits on each hand, rounded at the end like a human finger, but at least four times the girth of a normal man's finger. One digit was shorter, clearly more of a thumb-like appendage. He was grateful that finger was opposable—*grateful for the small favor*, he thought.

Of course, gloves could hide his hands to some degree, but there was no hiding his face. Anyone who glimpsed it would immediately recognize him for what he was. *Something not human.*

He scrubbed himself clean, and then climbed from the tub, noticing that the old man had slipped into the room and left a pile of clothing for him.

He is more silent than I can be, he thought. He wondered how that could be so. He had always assumed his ability to be silent was from his non-human heritage. He was stronger than most men. Faster and more durable. He healed from injury quicker, and he could move with stealth akin to that of a cat. All natural abilities for him, but all things he would easily give up if his hands and face could be normal instead.

He dressed in the skirt and layered jacket the old man had left for him. At the end, he stood in front of the room's full-length mirror, and looked at the clothing. It somehow suited him, but it left only his hands and his face exposed—the two parts he would prefer to see the least. He decided he would have to wash the cloak next, so he could don it again. He was about to set to that task, when the old man called to him.

"The tea is ready. Please come."

Not wanting to be rude, and knowing the man could not see his grisly visage, he left the steam of the bathroom.

The nameless man sat on his knees on the floor opposite the old man at a low table. He

had seen a formal tea ceremony performed before, from a distance, but he expected no such treatment here. Even though things were not set out formally—the tray the man used was a spotted plastic thing, the teapot itself was an elaborate cloisonné affair with gold and turquoise inlaid on the sides and lid. The cups were tiny, and their sides had matching cloisonné. Their ceramic underneath was so thin, he was afraid to grasp one with his meaty fingers. When he did, he was delighted to see the bottom of the cup was plain white ceramic, but a design of a geisha girl had somehow been molded into the bottom of the cup. He briefly held it up to allow sunlight to shine through the thin bottom of ceramic, so he could see the image more clearly. It made him smile. He set the cup down delicately, before the old man brought the pot over to pour.

He sat patiently and silently, waiting for the old man to speak. Instead, the old man poured the tea into both of the cups effortlessly, despite being blind. He did not insert his fingers in the cups to determine when they were full of liquid. He just appeared to know, and stopped pouring at precisely the correct instant.

At last, the cups were full, and the old man lifted his cup in his hands. The nameless man took his own delicate cup.

“You smell much better now.”

The nameless man smiled again.

“You never did tell me your name. What shall I call you?”

The smile evaporated. “I am sorry, Ojiisama. I...I do not have a name.”

The old man’s kind face turned suddenly concerned. “No name? At all? How is that possible?”

The nameless man was quiet for a few seconds. “I was not given one at birth. I...did not have a conventional childhood.”

The old man seemed to consider this information. Instead of asking about the unusual upbringing, the man changed direction. “Perhaps, we should find a name for you now, then.”

“I wish to be worthy of such a name first.”

The old man drank his tea silently.

The breeze blew cool wind into the open home, and the nameless man enjoyed the flowery scents on the air. He breathed in slowly, savoring every breath. His life had been difficult, full of scorn and battles. After escaping from a Europe still feeling the ravages of the Great War, he had journeyed into the Soviet Union, hoping that if he could not find tolerance there, he might at least lose himself in the gigantic mass of the state. But cruelty and hardship had found him once more. He eventually found himself in a prison camp in Siberia. He escaped when the Japanese invaded the area on one of their frequent forays into the lands north of their islands. He was immediately fascinated by the reserve and skill of the Japanese soldiers. Their facility with swords was amazing to watch. He had long since learned to keep to the shadows because of his deformities. So he stowed away on a ship that took him to the Japanese isles. He had hoped to find a home in Japan. But

rising nationalism and militarism was turning the Empire of Japan into another Germany. Plus, once he had covertly observed enough about the culture of the place, he understood that he would never be accepted in their world. Now he kept to the shadows, hunted the Emperor's wildlife in the forests, and hoped to one day decide where next he might journey. For now, he simply existed. That existence was necessary, but it certainly did not feel worthy of a name.

"I believe I understand," the old man said. He took another sip of tea. "Today we will rest, enjoy the Spring air, and drink tea. Tomorrow we will begin."

"Begin? Begin what, Ojiisama?"

"Developing your worth."

The old man woke him early the next day. He wore a white top again, similar to the one he had worn the previous day, and his pleated traditional skirt, or *Hakama*, was a deep shade of burgundy. The nameless man followed the blind man out onto a porch, into the Spring sunshine for a breakfast of rice and fish. As they ate, the old man asked him to tell about his past and how he had come to Japan.

The nameless stranger told the older man that he was the genetic offspring of a human woman raped by something that visited Earth from another world. He explained to the old man that he looked essentially human, but for his hands, which each had only three thick digits, and his face, which was visibly not human. The nameless man described his upbringing in Germany at the hands of some of these otherworldly creatures who were collaborating with the government, and who were experimenting with breeding. He had been too human looking for their tastes, and they kept him only to be a slave. He described his escape one night and how he had lived on the streets of Germany after the Great War. He found no acceptance in the German cities, though, his face too horribly abnormal for acceptance by even the most ostracized of citizens. He described his flight into the Soviet Union, where he hoped that even if he did not find acceptance in the brotherly ways of the Communists, he might at least find solitude in the vast open spaces of Russia. He told how he had been captured, beaten, and imprisoned yet again, only to escape once more, heading ever eastward, and how he had wound up in captivity for a third time in Siberia. He described his ultimate escape when the Japanese made one of their occasional forays into Russian territory, looking to expand their lands and settle long-standing disputes over the islands north of Hokkaido.

The nameless man spoke of how he had been fascinated by the bearing and culture of these invading warriors, and of how he had been enthralled by their use of not only guns, but swords, and even their own bodies, in battle. He told of how he watched them fight, and of the analogies he drew between their abilities and his own abnormal hereditary speed and agility.

He told the blind man that he had stowed away on a freight ship heading back to

Japan, and had evaded detection on the journey. But once in Japan, he soon learned from the shadows how challenging the language would be, and how difficult it would be to fit into Japanese society. Disheartened, and with no more drive to move on searching for a people that might welcome, or at least tolerate, his hideous countenance, he had watched the Japanese from the alleys and the fringes of society for years, before making his way farther into the forests and mountains deep in the interior of the country. He lived now by hunting and fishing, he said, each day completing those tasks necessary for survival, and attempting to cultivate a harmony with nature that he could not manage with mankind.

The blind man nodded throughout the story, seeming to understand the nameless man's plight. He did not ask any questions during the telling of the story. His face showed no emotion. When the nameless man's tale was finished, the old man finally spoke.

"You understand that I am blind. While I cannot see with my eyes, I can use the other senses I have to perhaps a greater degree than the average man. I hear the woodpecker searching for grubs on that evergreen tree." The Japanese man pointed off in the distance, and when the nameless man focused on the direction in which the old man pointed, he could finally hear the bird tapping as well. "I smell the blossoms on the breeze. I taste the fine intricacies of the fish we have just consumed."

The elderly man paused.

"My fingertips can tell me many things that eyes cannot. May I touch your features, so that I might understand your visage?"

The nameless man hesitated. This old blind man was the first human being to show him genuine kindness. He was worried that once the man understood how terrible his face truly was, he would no longer be kind. Still, he had observed Japanese society for long enough to know that denying the request would be perceived as rude, particularly in light of the man's kindness so far.

He leaned across the table, rising up partially on his knees to do so. "I have stretched across the table for your hands, Ojiisama."

The old man gently reached out his fingertips, gliding his hands left and right, starting at the top of the nameless man's head and working down to the chin. His face revealed no expression as his digits learned. The process took perhaps two minutes, but for the nameless man, they felt like a lifetime of apprehension and anxiety.

When the old man's fingers reached the chin, he removed his hands and placed them softly in his own lap. The nameless man sat back down again.

"I understand," the old man said. He spoke no more as they finished their meal.

After breakfast, they moved into the back of the home, to a room that appeared empty, save for a small Shinto shrine. The nameless man recalled having seen the shrine the previous day.

"My name is Hiroshi Honma," the old man told him. "You have told me of yourself, and you have shown me your true self. I will now show you what I do and who I am. If

you decide that you would like to do and be something similar, then you will become my pupil. If you do, you will call me teacher—or *Sensei*. If you choose to follow my path, you will develop the worth you seek, *Nameless*, and one day, you will feel worthy of bearing a true name.”

The old man moved silently to the shrine. There was a rectangular block of stone that must have weighed more than any two men could lift. It sat about two feet away from the wall, and it looked like granite, but Nameless was not sure what it was. On top of the block was a long silk cloth, stretched lengthwise along the gray stone, and on it were several small stone urns—one of which was Chinese jade, and the others were of a cream-colored polished stone. A small bowl of sand was on the left, and next to it were several incense sticks. At the right edge of the stone was a small bonsai tree in a red lacquered rectangular pot. In front of the shrine, on the floor, was a plush purple velvet pillow, large enough for Honma to kneel on it.

But Honma did not kneel on the pillow now. Instead he reached around the stone to the back, and Nameless heard a loud noise of stone grinding on stone.

The entire shrine slid back toward the wall. Under it was a yawning dark space, just large enough for a single man to fit through the opening.

Honma turned to him and said simply, “Follow.”

Then the blind man slipped into the hole, making his way down the tunnel until the top of his head was gone from sight.

Nameless moved forward and peered into the hole, but it was pitch black, and he could no longer see the old man.

He debated for just a second, then plunged into the darkness.

The tunnel was absolutely dark, but Nameless understood that—what need would the old man have for light? It was a long straight tunnel, no doubt only feet under the surface. It ran as straight as an arrow, and Nameless followed the smooth walls with his hands, as he trailed after the old man’s voice.

“These are dark times. The world is on the brink of another war. You would think by 1939, people on this planet would have learned better—especially after the last time. The Emperor is hell-bent on a nationalistic path that will lead Japan to glory...or more likely, to naked conflict with all the great powers of the world. The things happening in Europe sound dire to these old ears. I have been to Europe, you know. I advised many British soldiers in the Great War. I counseled the French, too. Ah, the smells in France...the bread...the cheese.” Honma’s voice tapered off as he became lost in recollection.

“Were you a general, Honma-san?” Nameless asked, quietly, attempting to gently nudge the man on with his tale.

“Not a general, no. Not even a soldier. Instead, I had a talent that was prized in the first war, and which has now led to me even being classified as an ‘Imperial Cultural

Asset'. A treasure of Japan, if you can believe that." Honma's voice scoffed at the notion.

Gradually, nameless could discern the temperature in the tunnel was growing warmer. They walked for a long time through the smooth-walled tunnel. The floor felt like dirt under his feet, but the walls were a worn stone.

"I met the creatures from another world, that you describe," the old man paused, allowing his nameless follower to digest the startling information. "I was in France, and I was approached by some who sympathized with the German cause. They led me to a meeting with some Germans who wanted me to create specialized tools for these creatures. I could not see them, of course, but I asked about them and was informed that they were benevolent creatures from beyond the stars, who were assisting and advising the German chancellor, a small and quite noxious man. I understood that if I was unwilling to make weapons for these men, they would likely kill me. I professed extreme enthusiasm for their cause, and convinced them of the process I use to make the weapons. I explained that I would need to return to Japan to gain the appropriate materials necessary for my craft. Luckily, they permitted me to return."

The man lapsed into silence, and Nameless followed him down the warming tunnel. A light was growing in the distance—more of an orange glow than a beam of direct light, and he wondered what it might be.

"Upon my return to Tokyo, I discovered that the Emperor himself had arranged for my clandestine meeting with the Germans and the aliens. He was very eager to align himself with them. I promised to return to work immediately."

They came to the end of the tunnel, and Nameless saw that the glow was in fact from a fire of some sort. The heat had increased exponentially, and now he was sweating in long rivulets down his disfigured face. The glow of the light danced and hopped on the walls at the end of the tunnel as only light from fire can do. There was a short ramp leading up into a building of some kind. Nameless followed the old man into what appeared to be a huge forge.

The room was wide and held a clay oven, with flames bursting and popping from it. Fine, silvery sand was heaped in a mound nearby, with several shovels inserted into the pile. On the other side of the kiln was a massive mound of coal, with half a dozen straw baskets scooped on one end, lying on the heap. The temperature in the room was blazing already in the Spring warmth.

"Don't mind the fire," Honma said. "I'm really just giving the oven a good cleaning. We won't use it for what we need until the winter sets in. Come upstairs."

He led Nameless to a far wall of the room, to a stairwell, and up. As they moved to the second and then the third stories, the heat dissipated somewhat. The windows of the structure had been left open, so the cool Spring breeze flitted through each empty room.

On the fourth floor, which was also empty, Nameless followed Honma to a set of windows and a door. Honma walked out onto a balcony and grabbed a railing. Nameless stepped onto the balcony and took in the serene view. They were on the fourth floor of a

tall, wooden pagoda. He could see that there was at least one more floor above them. The immediate area around the building was a natural meadow, but the land looked as if it had been allowed to follow its own course for many years, without the tending hand of a gardener or groundskeeper. To the front of them on the ground was a *torri* gate, its paint long since faded from a red to a mottled gray and pink. It lent more credence to his theory that this area had long been abandoned. Behind them was a steep mountain face, rising well above the pagoda, and casting its shadow on the scene. Beyond these immediate features were only endless trees and hills.

Nameless had traveled widely in the forests as he hunted and lived on the land for the last years, but he had never caught even a glimpse of this tall, traditional building in the middle of nowhere. He scanned the surroundings and quickly saw how easily the little valley might be concealed by the surrounding hills.

Honma breathed the fresh air deeply. "This place is my own. No one knows about it. I retreated to this remote spot, which my ancestors had once owned, and I have stayed here or at the house, ever since. I refused to make the weapons the Emperor wanted, and I refused to help the Germans or their strange inhuman allies. You understand that those creatures were the same ones you knew, yes? Your smell is not the same as theirs, but you have bits of it in you. When I first detected you in the tree, I thought you were their assassin, sent to kill me for not complying with the Emperor's request."

"No, Honma-san. I am no assassin."

"I know this now. You have lived through much hardship, and you have a polite manner. When you told me that you did not feel worthy of a name, I understood that you were different from those other war-mongering creatures."

Honma faced the nameless hybrid. "I am old now. I will only live a few years more, I think. It is time for me to pass what I know on to a disciple. Come up to the top floor, and tell me if you wish to learn."

Honma turned and navigated back to the stairs, heading up once again.

The nameless man was curious about what exactly Honma had to teach. He ascended the stairs into a wonderland of beauty. Set between the windows of the top floor, which were all closed and shuttered, were rack after rack of cherry wood handles, all holding a brilliant and bewildering variety of Samurai swords. *Katanas*, he had heard them called.

The man with the hideous face walked around the room slowly, peering intently at each sword. Some were black, and others had scabbards the shade of tangerines and mangoes. Some were blood red, and some had elaborate cotton rope twined around them. Some had jewels embedded in the handles. The only thing the blades shared was that each was different from the next. The room must have held over a hundred of the amazing weapons, each sheathed and presenting beauty and artistic panache, far more than menace.

He became aware that Honma was looking at him and waiting patiently. "You made these works of art, Honma-san?"

“I did. They are the culmination of a lifetime’s worth of work. Each blade takes perhaps a month, or perhaps ten. They are like children to me. Do you understand?”

“Each is unique, with love and attention given to its creation, and its caretaking—just like with a child,” the nameless man said.

“Yes. I thought you would understand.”

Honma fell silent, still watching Nameless, waiting, apparently, for a comment.

The homeless, nameless, abandoned man could think of only one thing to say.

“I would be deeply honored and forever grateful, if you would teach me, *Honma-Sensei*.”

Snow had been falling, and they had not slept for three days. The fire needed constant tending, and although they could have taken turns sleeping, Honma explained that he would remain awake for the full three days. Nameless kept him company for those days. Neither man spoke during this time. Nameless helped to tend the fire when he was not needed to prepare meals for them or fetch water for his teacher.

It was close to the end of the winter, and they were making the *Tamahagane*, or Jewel Steel, now, because the fierce icy weather outside helped to reduce the blazing temperature inside the forge.

Nameless had spent every day under Honma’s tutelage since that first day in the room with the *katanas* at the top of the tower. He had been like a sponge for months, never asking for a day off, and never wanting to rest. Each day ended similarly, when Honma would wearily exclaim, “I am tired. I think we should end for the night.” Nameless would always respond the same way, “As you wish, Honma-Sensei.”

They had trained in the ways of holding a sword, of pulling it from its scabbard, and of resheathing it. They had begun combat with wooden swords, practicing in the overgrown meadow outside the five-story tower. After lunch they would switch to a seated instruction, with Honma lecturing on the great sword craft traditions of centuries past. Nameless paid rapt attention, memorizing the names of each part of the sword, and listening intently to the stories describing the different techniques associated with sword craft.

Once a week the men had walked back through the forest to the tree where they had met. On these walks, they would discuss the actual process of creating the Tamahagane, and the forging of the blade. Nameless rarely asked questions about the process. When he did, Honma praised him for asking the correct question for the issue at hand. When they reached the tree, they had parted ways, Nameless journeying into the forest to hunt, and Honma walking into the nearest village as he had always done, to obtain food and small supplies. He had maintained his weekly trip to keep up appearances with the shopkeepers, and Nameless had been left behind because of his looks. Still, the meat he had provided for them was well appreciated.

The summer had flown, with the compliments coming more frequently from Honma on Nameless's stances, gait, and bearing. His speed and agility were excellent, and the old man, who was himself lightning quick with a blade, and who had awarded his pupil his first opportunity to touch a real blade just a month after they had begun, finally granted his student the right to use a true blade in their practice combat, at the onset of Autumn. This was a privilege not often extended to pupils before years had passed, but Nameless grasped every concept and excelled at it rapidly.

By mid-winter, Honma's teachings had decreased each day until there was less and less new material for Nameless to learn, and more and more revision of what he had already learned. Although Honma had not said so, Nameless felt that the old man had begun to see him less as a student and more as an assistant by that point.

Now, deep into February, they had finally embarked on the process of tending the kiln for three straight days, maintaining perfect temperature in the clay oven, so that the steel they were creating stayed just shy of molten. Honma could tell the temperature of the fire from its sound and the heat on his body, but he instructed Nameless verbally on what the sighted younger man might look for with his eyes as tell-tale signs that the steel was where it should be.

On the morning of the fourth day, Honma addressed Nameless. "Listen to the oven. Is it time to break up the furnace?"

Nameless listened intently to the ever-present crackle. He got down on his knees and guided metal pokers through the holes at the base of the oven, into the mix. He peered into the holes at the colors of the flaming ore.

"The time has arrived," he said reverently.

They used long poles with flat edges to pull and tug on the clay oven, pulling it apart in chunks, Nameless always sweeping the debris clear. Eventually they were able to pull the ingot from the oven with a chain. Once it finally cooled, Honma began breaking parts of it into smaller chunks. They separated the smaller bits into two piles—those that broke easily and those that required more effort. The easier pieces would yield a more brittle steel. Those parts that were more difficult to break would be tougher, but both types would be needed for the process of forging.

When they had finished with the *tamahagane*, the old man smiled with relief. "This is good steel. We will make a fine blade with this."

He showed Nameless how the different pieces of raw steel weighed and described their appearance, and which pieces would be stronger and why. Nameless had heard about the process of sorting the steel for months, and now that he finally held the pieces in his three-fingered hands, he understood the process, and found it easy to determine which pieces would be the most useful.

They treated the pieces to keep them from rusting, then headed back through the tunnel to the house.

"Next comes the exciting part," Honma said. "But first we will take a day of rest, to

enjoy the cold air and the last tangs of winter.”

The heating of the steel allowed it to soften, so they could combine many pieces into one. Nameless hammered, while Honma tended to heat and turning the metal. Each time the nameless man’s muscles rippled as he swung the hammer, the hammer would slam into the steel, sending a shower of sparks flying away from the metal. These sparks contained impurities in the metal—slag—that they needed to remove.

A stray spark shot up and hit the nameless man in the corner of his eye, singeing the skin there.

“Are you alright?” Honma asked with concern.

“Yes, *Sensei*. I can continue.”

The old man walked across the room to the far side of the forge, where he opened a massive steamer trunk. Inside he pulled out a thick leather jacket and a something that flopped like rubber.

As he brought the items forward, the nameless man could see them more clearly. The jacket was a double-breasted leather style, like a military officer’s jacket. The other item was a full head gas mask, with glass lenses and a thick filter extending from where the mouth would be.

“Keepsakes from my travels in Europe. I thought the mask would be especially useful for protection from flying sparks, but I found I sweated too much in it. Maybe you will find more use from these things.”

Nameless pulled on the leather jacket. It fit him perfectly. He pulled the mask on over his face and found breathing in it quite easy. Visibility was fine through the glass lenses. His hearing was diminished slightly by the rubber, but he would make do. He returned to hammering, with Honma twisting the long metal.

“A significant improvement,” Nameless said through the mask. “Thank you.”

Nameless continued to pound the steel flat, then hammering it over the edge of the anvil until the steel was shaped in a right angle. Then he would move and hit the bent edge from the other side, folding the metal over on itself until it was flat again, blending the two layers into one, and removing more impurities, mixing carbon and iron until the two were in perfect harmony.

Honma returned the sword to the fire, heating it up and healing any defects, making the blade pliable again, so that Nameless might smash and fold it yet again.

They repeated this process sixteen times.

As they worked, Honma began discussing his youth. He spoke of the development of his apolitical allegiance, first to those that could appreciate his work, and eventually to anyone who might pay for his beautiful swords. Then, after traveling to Europe and offering his services to advise factories in the sword-making and soldiers on their use of those weapons in war, he grew weary of violence.

“It is an irony that a man who dedicated his life to making swords would yearn to turn to the ploughshare. But I never began making swords for the blood they would one day shed. Rather, they were a technical challenge and an opportunity to create a thing of beauty with sweat and effort.”

“I understand,” the nameless man said while hammering, his voice altered slightly by the filter of the gas mask.

“I know that you do, my friend.”

It was the first time since they had begun, that Honma had referred to the nameless man as anything other than *Nameless*, and the moment was not lost on the pupil.

They hammered the different types of steel into long pieces, and then came the critical joining of the two. The nameless man pounded the harder steel flat, and then folded it into a U shape. The tougher steel was heated until it glowed like the sun, and then he inserted into the U-shaped channel in the other. Now the harder steel, which could be sharpened to a fine edge, was on the outside, and the core was comprised of the tougher steel, which was flexible enough to absorb the impacts of multiple strikes.

Finally, working in perfect tandem with hardly a word shared between them, as if the men had known each other for lifetimes, the blind man and the man with no name painted the sides of the blade with a mixture of clay and charcoal powder. This action would allow some parts of the different metals to meld with more tenacity than others. Then, they together heat-forged the melded qualities of steel in a raging furnace, before quickly quenching the heated metal in a large stone tub filled with icy cold water.

The operation was precise and delicate. If the air in the furnace was too hot, the steel would shatter in the tub. If the blade was too cool in the fire, the joining of the metals would simply not hold.

“One out of every three blades is lost at this critical juncture,” Honma said as he dipped the blazing blade into the tub. A jet of steam rose from the surface of the water. Then he slowly lifted the blade into the air. “Describe it for me.”

The nameless man described the metal in full. It had been straight still, when plunged into the still rippling water. But the different in quality of the metals it contained meant that they contracted when cooled at different rates. The top of the sword shrank much faster, pulling the metal upward into the distinctive curve of the Samurai sword.

“Together, the two have formed perfection,” he told his master and friend.

“**The rest is** for you,” Honma had told him. Days had passed, and the nameless man worked tirelessly on the other elements of the weapon: the *suba*, or cross guard; the *saya*, or scabbard; the intricate wrapping of the *suka*, or handle. But what Honma had meant by his comment was the ultimate honor. He had meant the polishing of the blade and the

sharpening of the edge to its wicked keenness.

They spoke little over the weeks that followed, but perhaps enjoyed each other's company the more for it. Through the process of the making of the sword, they had somehow become friends and equals, and while no words were exchanged to such an effect, their actions displayed this newfound quality to their interactions with kindness and respect.

They ate their meals again on the front balcony of the house, on the days when the Spring appeared to be blooming early, but then the cold brittle days would return, driving them back indoors, near the warmth of the coal fire. They had been together for just a year. Honma would now prepare the meals, and the nameless man would work tirelessly at polishing. For the first two weeks of this new year together, Nameless used larger polishing rectangular stones, but then eventually he moved to the smallest of polishing stones—sometimes as tiny as flecks of sand, which he gently slid along the length of the blade with the tip of one massive digit.

He took excessive care while polishing the blade, but still nicked himself several times in the process. Through the polishing, the wavy line Honma had applied before the quenching, with clay and charcoal, revealed itself as an amazing work of art, with a miniscule cherry tree image worked into the exact center of the wavering line, or *hamon*. The nameless man understood that this small detail was for him, and in honor of their first meeting place.

Nameless wore the leather jacket while sitting out on the crisp breezy days, working patiently and polishing endlessly. Weeks later, as the weather was finally beginning to lose its deep chill, he began the sharpening of the tip.

The nameless man thought he might be days away from finishing the sword, when Honma touched his shoulder.

"Someone comes," he said softly. "You should go to the forge, and, just in case, you might want to put on the mask."

The nameless man quickly gathered his polishing implements and took them with him in one hand, and the blade in his other. He retreated through the house, and down the long tunnel to the forge, now so well known to him that he would have little problem navigating it if he were the blind man. Once in the forge, he located the gas mask and donned it. Then he stood and waited, wondering what he should do next. He made up his mind inside of a minute and returned down the long passage to the house.

When he arrived, he slipped quietly to the front room, and peered through a crack in the rice paper walls, his vision slightly distorted by the lenses of the mask.

Honma stood on the grass in front of the house, speaking softly to two large, blonde-haired men. Nameless knew them to be Germans from their Teutonic looks, and military from their bearing. They were accompanied by two shorter, but no less proud, Japanese men. One was quite young, and one was much older, although still younger than Honma. Nameless could not hear the conversation, but he could see from Honma's posture that he

was calm, yet firm, with the men. Whatever they were asking for, he was denying it to them. The men seemed very unhappy, but did not allow their disappointment to blossom into anger. Within minutes, the four intruders turned and walked away.

When Honma returned indoors, he made no indication that he wished to speak about the visitors, so the nameless man did not ask.

Wearing the mask became second nature for the man. It was comfortable now, and he left it on his face more often than not. The lenses magnified his view just slightly, and he found they helped to reduce glare as he worked on sharpening the highly polished blade.

Everything had been completed, except for the sharpening of the very tip, and he lovingly and delicately worked the fine metal. He had not cut himself in weeks. His touch was that of a master craftsman, a fine artist, and a connoisseur of every aspect of the weapon.

The sword had become his myopic world.

It was only when he paused to get a drink of water for himself that he realized that he was done. The sword was finished. The blade was sharp. He had hardly given thought to what it would be like to finish the weapon, and now that it was done, he was unsure what to do.

He held the glimmering blade up in the brilliant sunshine, moving it this way and that. The silver sheen of the length of the blade was blinding. The hamon had a nearly blue tinge to it, and the sunlight rippled across the cherry tree Honma had painted into the line. They had together etched a long line of chrysanthemums into the blade by the hilt. The light caught in those etchings, and sank, as if sucked into a voice of blackness. The wound rope of the *suka* was jet black, as was the highly polished scabbard of lacquered wood.

A work of art.

Nameless sheathed the stunning blade, then stood to find Honma and present the weapon to him, as completed. But then he remembered that Honma had left hours ago for the forge, to tidy some things. It was not uncommon now for Nameless to lose himself completely in his work on the blade. Time was immaterial. He and Honma had no reason for rushing, and the sword would be ready when it decided to be ready, as Honma had said many times over the last year.

The nameless man journeyed through the tunnel to the forge, carrying the sword in hand.

When he emerged at the forge, he knew something was not right.

Things were in disarray, scattered around the room. Honma, as a blind man, was particular about his placement of tools, so he could easily find them again. The nameless man suspected that even if his friend was not blind, he would have been as meticulous.

But now tools were in strange locations, as if Honma had suffered a tantrum and

thrown things all around the room.

Still wearing the mask and holding the sword, the nameless man moved around the forge, noting each item out of place. Metal prod bars across the coal pile. Wicker baskets upturned. Shovels on the floor, in places where Honma might trip over them.

Then, at the base of the stairs, he noticed the blood.

Moving quickly, he ran up the steps, searching each vacant floor on his way up to the collection on the fifth floor. As he emerged from the stairs, his head entering the room at the top of the pagoda tower, he understood what had happened.

The men had returned. They had found the secret pagoda in the hills somehow. The room was empty of swords. All one hundred blades and their scabbards were gone. Several of the hand-carved racks had been broken, their raw exposed wood an affront to the sacred space.

He moved to the windows and went out onto the uppermost balcony, looking down into the unkempt meadow. The *torri* gate was singed with strange burn marks in places, as if some kind of fire had hit it with pinpoint accuracy.

Then he saw the body in the grass.

The nameless man raced down the steps so quickly, his feet barely touched them. At the level of the forge, he sprinted to the doors, and launched himself across the field to the fallen Japanese man.

Honma was covered in blood, and lying in a small pool of it. He lay on his back, his head pointed up at the sky, his chest rising and falling in small hitches. There was a deep puncture wound on his chest that bubbled a stark crimson balloon of fluid. On his arms were more of the peculiar burn marks. His eyes, although blind, were still open.

“Ah,” he coughed and wheezed. “There you are, Mr. Mask. I am pleased to see you are unscathed.”

“Honma-san, what can I do?” the nameless man asked, having slid to his knees next to the old man in the tall grass. He held the sword in both hands, horizontal to the ground, almost forgotten. Now that his friend and mentor had been gravely injured, all the care he had placed into the object for a year seemed meaningless.

“Is it finished?” Honma asked, his voice quieter than the last time he had spoken.

“Yes.”

“Do you now understand why we have created the sword?”

He did. It all came to him in a rush. Honma had never really thought he had escaped the Germans or their strange, alien allies. He knew all along that the Emperor’s men would find him, even here in the remote countryside. He had understood that these creatures of warfare would be the end of him.

The nameless man saw all the geopolitical pieces go together in his mind. Honma had brought news of the world after each trip into the village to get supplies. In the last

year, things had gone from bad to worse. The Germans were rampaging across Europe. Japan was attacking every neighboring nation in the Pacific, going so far as to invade Mongolia. Britain and France were retaliating. The aliens—the strange creatures that had bred and tortured him as a child—they had thrown in their lot with the Germans. And this time, the Japanese had sided with them as well. The world was exploding into another Great War. But this one would be different. As he knelt next to his dying friend and mentor, he recalled the boasts of his tormentors, through his horrible childhood. They were just an advanced force. Spies. Advisors. Diplomats. Counselors. They would make the alliances they could, and gather what information was needed. Eventually, others would come. Hordes of others. Legions. An invasion force.

Looking at the wounded Honma on the grass, he understood that Honma, with his knowledge of war and warlike men had understood all too well, what the presence of the extraterrestrials had meant.

“Yes, Honma-san. I understand now, the purpose of this weapon.” He said it with great sadness, but also with acceptance.

“Then put the bitter edge of this sword to its grim purpose, and do not feel sadness in your heart.”

The old man grew silent, the rising and falling of his chest increasingly shallow. The nameless man was determined to stay by his side, until the chest stopped moving completely. Then he would find those responsible, and show them the implement he had been honing for a year. When that work was done, he would seek out the aliens on this planet and dispatch them, one by one.

A full minute had passed when Honma spoke again, his voice stronger, and startling in the silence of the field.

“You have a purpose now. A solemn task. You are the most worthy man on the planet of carrying it out. Have you found your sense of worth?”

Honma coughed, but it was a very soft cough.

Speaking through the distorting air filter of the gas mask, the younger man’s voice sounded normal, but it felt strangled. “I have. Thank you.”

“Then find a name for yourself.” Honma’s voice softened to a whisper, but he could still be heard. “As for me, I will move into the next world calling you: *Son*.”



ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATION

The image on the following page is an illustration from amazingly talented artist Jason Worthington. It originally accompanied this short story in the 2013 anthology *Warbirds of Mars: Stories of the Fight!* I instantly fell in love with the picture, as I felt Jason had really captured the essence of the story. And he didn't have much to go on! As the organizational and copy editor on that anthology, I was incredibly busy—so much so, that I neglected to write my own story for it until the very end. As a result, poor Jason had only my brief description that follows, from which to create this illustration. He didn't get to read my story until the book was released. Here's what I gave him:

“I'm thinking of an image of [Mr. Mask] slumped on his knees with the gas mask on, but no helmet. He's wearing the coat, but it has no emblems on it yet. In the background there might be a Japanese Torii Gate and a pagoda-like temple. His master, the old man, lies dead on the ground in front of him, and Mask is holding the sword across his knees.”

I think he nailed it pretty well, and he added so much more than I ever could have asked for, or even thought to have asked for. Jason was kind enough to let me use the illustration for this story's cover, but on the following page you can see it in its pristine form.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KANE GILMOUR is the international bestselling author of *The Crypt of Dracula*. He is also co-author of *Ragnarok* and *Omega*, the fourth and fifth novels in Jeremy Robinson's Jack Sigler/Chess Team series. He also writes his own thriller novels, including the popular Jason Quinn novel, *Resurrect*. In addition to his work in novels, Kane works with artist and creator Scott P. Vaughn on the sci-fi noir webcomic, *Warbirds of Mars*. Kane lives with his family in Vermont.

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JASON WORTHINGTON has appeared in comic books published by Viper, Arcana, Spazdog, and Moonstone. He is also an award-nominated sketch card artist, who has worked for 5FINITY, Bad Axe Studios, and Cryptozoic Productions. He can be seen currently inking covers and interiors for *Zombies vs. Cheerleaders* by 3 Finger Prints. See more of his work at eltoromuerto.deviantart.com and eltoromuerto.blogspot.com.

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