



BETTER OFF  
DEAD

SECRET WAR SOCIETY  
FAN FICTION

E. HALSEY MILES

*For Shadowfist fans across the globe, whatever juncture you're from.*

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# Hellas, Mars, 2125

Hiroshi Kata scrolled through the report on his terminal for probably the seventh time. He sucked in a deep breath of thin, antiseptic air, letting it out in a kind of sigh. He paused momentarily, focusing on a photograph of lush greenery and tropical rain. *Where was that photo taken*, he wondered. He found himself almost hopeful it was Japan.

He looked up from the terminal and glanced out the window, unintentionally comparing the red Martian skyline to that of his birthplace. He surveyed rows of tall, silver and chrome skyscrapers, all reflecting the red sky, all coated with a layer of fine red dust that pervades the planet. In the far distance he could see the Martian desert, covered with the hardy genetically engineered scrub. But there was not a drop of rain in sight.

Oh, how he missed the rain—it'd been more than fifty years since he'd felt rain on his face. As much as he loved Mars, he hated that it never rained here. And it would never rain here, not for at least a hundred years. Even with his cybernetically enhanced lifespan, he wouldn't live to see it.

He put the terminal down and gave some thought about how to deal with the report. To start with, as far as he knew, Earth hadn't seen significant greenery since the doomsday prophecy was fulfilled, over forty years ago.

But more importantly, neither the Dragon nor the Little Dragon had authorized Sheng's little junket back to Jigoku. Back to what the Martians now called Hell: Earth. Because Hell is what the planet they abandoned had become.

They were going to be upset. If he let this report get to them, that is.

He tapped a button on the terminal. "Online," a pleasant female voice responded.

"Sheng."

The terminal responded with a short series of beeps, and to his credit, Sheng's face immediately appeared on the terminal.

"Greetings, Hiroshi-sama," Sheng said, bowing as much as he could to his hand terminal.

“Sheng-san,” Kata replied. “You’ve been quite busy, I see.”

“You refer to my trip to LaGrange?”

“Yes, that. And beyond.”

Sheng merely nodded firmly. Beyond was clearly an understatement.

“I’d even go so far as to say that you’ve been...disobedient?”

Sheng looked down, slightly away from the terminal, a sign of respect. “I humbly beg to differ, Hiroshi-sama.”

“Jigoku is strictly off limits,” Kata responded curtly.

“Not to the Kazoku. Not to you and me.”

“You believe your heritage gives you dispensation. I do not believe The Dragon will see it that way.”

“She retired decades ago. She is no longer interested in Jigoku.”

“Retired or not, The Dragon has led us every step of the way.” Kata grew animated as he spoke, his reverence for The Dragon apparent in his fervent tone. “She was our salvation. She decoded the prophecy. She prepared the way. She brought us here. She saved humanity. She saved **us**.”

“Yes, Hiroshi-sama, all you say is true, her accomplishments are truly legendary! But the prophecy has been fulfilled. There is no more of it, no more secrets waiting for us from mystical sources. Every ending is just a new beginning. What comes next is our beginning. She saved us so that we could build our future, then she retired and passed the mantle to The Little Dragon.”

“You do understand that for her, retirement doesn’t mean she doesn’t care.”

“She trusts Song to act in the best interests of the Kazoku.”

“And after Song retires, you’ll be the one to lead us in this new beginning, I take it?”

“Humbly, I would not dare to usurp that right from you, Hiroshi-sama.”

Kata tried not to smile, but couldn’t quite suppress it—the corner of one lip curled up.

“You flatter me, but those days are long since behind me. You are the heir to the Dragon. Leadership of the Kazoku is not my fate.”

“It is merely the truth. I could not hope to match your superior experience.”

Kata closed his eyes, then reopened them. He knew Sheng was manipulating

him, he knew exactly what buttons the boy was pressing. But damn, knowing that didn't diminish its effectiveness. He and Sheng both knew what he wanted.

"What is your appraisal of the situation?"

"When the prophecy completed, all chi on the planet vanished, leading to enormous calamity and the destruction of basically all life. We thought this was permanent, but..." He paused, letting this sink in. "I believe chi is returning. The prophesied doomsday did not leave the planet completely barren after all. Jigoku is not eternally doomed—life has survived, and in greater quantities than was believed possible. Drone surveillance estimates the population to be on the order of thirty million, concentrated mostly in southeast Asia and Central America. And..."

Sheng paused. This pause caught Kata's attention. Was it deliberate, or was Sheng having trouble figuring out the right words?

"Continue, Sheng."

"I believe there was an Inner Walker. The portals may have re-opened."

Kata hardened his features, refusing to let his reaction to this be seen. "Are you certain?"

"No, Hiroshi-sama. The signs are there, but I do not have proof. We need to investigate, and the investigation will require someone who is also an Inner Walker, like you."

*Damn, Hiroshi thought. This changes everything. If the portals are open again, the balance of chi could shift rapidly. Inner Walkers could potentially create a critical shift. No one was truly certain if Mars would be immune to one.* His decision was nearly instant.

"What do you suggest, Heir to the Dragon?"

"I need ships. Maybe five hundred men and provisions for them. We need to establish a base."

"Song will never approve that. His position on Jigoku is clear, as was Xu Mei's before him—we are never to return for any reason."

Sheng looked surprised. Kata never referred to the Dragon by name, and that caught Sheng just slightly off guard. He recovered quickly, and to his credit, he went full tilt.

“You can approve it.”

Kata sighed. He weighed the risks. *This is big enough, he might approve an exception. But sometimes, it's better to beg forgiveness than ask permission.*

Kata decided that he was willing to beg forgiveness. He had proven himself time and again. Song and Xu Mei would forgive—he hoped.

“You presume a great deal, Sheng. But you’re right, I will.”

“This will be a glorious enterprise for us both.”

Kata let himself smile. “Don’t worry Sheng, you’ll get the credit.” What remained unspoken, but clearly communicated: *And the blame, should this go sideways.*

Sheng smiled. “Thank you, Hiroshi-sama. I am, as always, deeply in your debt.” Sheng bowed his head again, then cut the connection.

Kata let the terminal drop, barely noticing it clattering on the glass desk. At that moment, he only had eyes for the dusty, windy Martian skyline.

*Rain. Once again, I will feel rain on my face.*

Despite the seed of concern that his life’s work was suddenly in grave danger, that thought brought a smile to an old man’s face. He couldn’t wait.



# Flashback: Forgotten CDCA Lab, The Netherworld, 2016

Lo Kan studied a massive steel door, looking for any structural weakness he might use. Clearly the door hadn't opened in many years; the bland, gray, just slightly glowing *not-rock* that made up the un-shaped Netherworld had started to take over, fusing into the door's mechanism. It wasn't going to open, not without a much more skilled shaper than he was.

"What are you waiting for, darling," the gorgeous brunette standing just behind him demanded. At least, Lo Kan would find her gorgeous if he didn't know what she was. "Open it already! I can...smell that this is the place I've been looking for."

"Well," he responded with an apparent lack of concern. "You see, this place is being reclaimed by the Netherworld. I had to open multiple passages just to get to this point—nobody's been here in years. It's not going to just open, and I'm not quite certain of the best approach."

She smiled, displaying perfectly white, especially sharp teeth behind her blood-red lips. "In that case, I recommend...violence."

He turned and gave her a flat look. "And here I thought you came to me for a different solution."

Her smile remained. "A girl can't change her stripes, Lo Kan."

Oh indeed, that much was true about Desdemona Deathangel. She was once a superstar for the Buro and the CDCA, but since her apparent death during Homo Omega's failed attempt to destroy all of humanity, she had become a free agent. Or at least, as much of a free agent as an abomination can—she was still subject to the technology that could control her, buried deep inside her. He suspected her true purpose in finding this lab was that she believed something in this lab could remove that control.

"Fine. In this case, you're right, I don't see another option." He held up a hand and motioned toward the door. Without a sound, three hulking beasts with

inky black skin marred by implanted arcanotechnology stepped forward. They raised massive fists and pounded at the door.

There was a loud, echoing banging noise, but otherwise, nothing changed. The abominations didn't stop, though, and after a dozen repetitions, the door finally started to dent.

"Ohh," she said with an odd, girlish delight. "I do love watching your creations work. But I think I will be faster."

Lo Kan chuckled. "Never change, Desdemona. Never change." He motioned for his abominations to stop, and they obeyed.

Desdemona stepped up to the door, running her claws along the dents that had been made until she felt the right point—then her claws sunk into the steel as though it were soft butter, and she flat-out ripped a chunk of steel out of the massive frame.

The Deathangel didn't wait; she rushed through the door and disappeared into the darkened laboratory. Lo Kan followed at a more sedate pace, heeding his heart's call for caution. He motioned for the abominations to follow.

As he stepped into the much darker tunnel, he just had to follow Desdemona's delighted giggling. Lo Kan had to admire whomever had imbued that one—most abominations were just brutal, thoughtless monsters. Desdemona, however, was a brutal, super intelligent monster with the figure of a super model and the heart of a six year old. She had to be one of the most terrifying creatures Lo Kan had ever seen, and he hoped he could someday create a work of art as perfect as her. In truth, that was his life's goal—the creation of perfection. He had spent a lifetime bringing demons to the CDCA for conversion, but he hungered to be the artist, not the supplier.

Which was the whole point of coming here. In theory, assuming Desdemona wasn't lying, this laboratory was where Homo Omega had engineered his final plot, and could contain the secrets to recreating the Omega species. Only this time, one that wouldn't decide to wipe out humanity.

Desdemona's distant voice shouted out from the facility. "This is it! Lo Kan, Lo Kan, this is it! Hurry up, darling, you must see!"

"I'll be right there," he called out. *But not without precautions.* Lo Kan was fully



aware that he could be past the point of usefulness to her, and she might try something deadly. It **is** what she was created for, after all.

When he entered the central chamber, though, the half-expected ambush wasn't there. Instead, in the center of the room, inside a glass containment unit, lay a large cyborg. Red and green lights flickered from the console of the unit, their dim glow illuminating stacks of computers and arcanotechnological equipment.

Desdemona stood at the containment unit, her long-clawed fingers running over the glass in an almost sensual manner. "He's here, Lo Kan. This is him."

Lo Kan furrowed his brow. "A Nachtshreck unit? That's just a cyborg assassin. And not a very reliable one, if I recall."

"Nooooo," Desdemona practically purred. "Not just any Nachtshreck. He put the Omega gene in this one. It is...like his son."

The furrowed brow gave way to widened eyes. "That's unexpected!"

She turned and practically slinked up to Lo Kan, pausing when he took an almost involuntary step back.

"With this, **you** can create...perfection. You can begin again. Only this time, better. This time, with me. And him. And you. We can remake...everything. We can make it all...perfect."

While she spoke, she almost imperceptibly touched a series of buttons on the containment unit. The glass shield popped open with a hiss.

Lo Kan wasn't ready for the speed of the Nachtshreck unit; he'd been expecting an ambush by the Deathangel, but the cyborg was an element he had not fully considered. He'd barely taken a step back when the unit had its hands around his throat, crushing his windpipe. He was only going to have a second to counter this. His demon suppression unit, which would work great against Desdemona, wasn't going to do squat against this cyborg.

"No, no, no, no!" Desdemona called. "No, Omega! He's with me! We need him!"

Almost immediately the cyborg released him, and Lo Kan dropped to the rubbery floor with a thud. He choked, trying to breathe, but it was difficult to get enough air. The world started to swim.

“Him?” The unit’s disdain could not be more clear. “I do not see a need for a human.”

Desdemona moved to interpose herself between Lo Kan and the Nachtshreck unit. “Because, my sweet Omega, we need a new plan that doesn’t turn absolutely everyone against us.” She paused and though Lo Kan couldn’t see it, he could hear the smile in her voice. “And I have that plan. And we need him for it.”

The Nachtshreck stepped to one side and looked down at Lo Kan. “If you insist. However, we have about ninety seconds before he expires. If you wish him to survive, you will allow me tend to him.”

The Deathangel stepped aside. “Of course, darling, of course!”

The Nachtshreck unit knelt next to him. “H-h-how”, Lo Kan tried to ask, though it barely sounded like a word.

“An arcanowave link,” Desdemona responded as the Nachtshreck unit knelt next to him. “As a backup, he copied himself into this unit he’d been working on.”

“However,” the Nachtshreck Omega interjected, “The link was to activate automatically. It did not. Something happened that I did not anticipate. I will need to investigate.”

Then the cyborg touched his partially crushed neck. Lo Kan felt a massive surge of pain and promptly passed out.

# Australia, Earth, 2125

Yingl Bojue didn't so much fall out of the portal as he was spat out of it, flying through the air for several feet before landing and sliding across hard ground covered with loose rocks. His leather duster protected him from what would have been some pretty ugly tears in his flesh, but it did not prevent the silver case he had been carrying from flying out of his hand and skittering across the ground. And more, the duster did nothing to protect him from the bruising that all of the rocks he landed on would cause.

But at least he seemed to have managed not to break anything, he decided as he picked himself up.

"Where the hell am I?" he asked no one in particular. He looked around, squinting tightly from the all-too-bright sun, high in the sky, while he tried to ignore the aching in his bones.

"And just as importantly, **when** am I?"

He looked back and forth, trying to suss out something—anything—about where he found himself. But the list of things that he didn't see that he expected to was long, and it included the portal that brought him here, any plants, any animals, any people, and his briefcase.

"Fuck! The case!" As he realized he'd lost track of it, the anxiety started to well out from his chest, spreading until it was a light ringing in his ears and a tingling in his fingers.

"Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," he shouted, looking around, proceeding from anxiety directly into panic. His eyes darted about, looking everywhere at the landscape, but failing to actually see anything. The sudden sharp pain from kicking a rock brought him back into focus.

"Get ahold of yourself, cheese-whiz." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath and counted to five before releasing the breath and opening his eyes. Calmer now, he looked around and took stock.

"Desert. Duh, the fact that I've been here maybe three minutes and I'm covered in sweat gave that part away. Fine. I'm in a desert. I landed...here." He

put a boot into the visibly disturbed rocks where he'd struck the ground. "Let's see, I came from that way, so the case must have gone...aha!"

He took a few dozen steps and found the case, now rather badly dented and scratched up, wedged between two larger rocks. Both of them jagged with multiple sharp protuberances. He couldn't help but imagine how much worse it would have been for him if he'd landed on those larger rocks, rather than the much smaller scattering of them he actually hit.

"At least Angie isn't going to have to kill me for losing this," he said as he picked the case up. "Now. If this is here, and I landed there, the portal would have to be right...there."

But where he pointed was just emptiness on a slope, leading up toward an especially large outcropping that disappeared into shimmering reflections from the heat emanating from the stone.

"Well. Maybe Angie won't have to kill me because I'll die here in this desert that I don't know where or when it is. That's...about how I'd expect it all to end, yeah."

He started to move toward where he guessed he exited the Netherworld, but was interrupted by an ear-piercing screech that completely filled the air around him. The sound was almost like a warning siren, but higher in tone and more organic than a mechanical device would be. He turned around to see if he could identify the source of the obnoxious sound.

The source was pretty obvious, but difficult for him to believe: A gigantic squid-like creature, not less than twenty feet tall, barelling directly toward him.

"Oh. Yay," he said quietly, watching the creature in disbelief until it was nearly on top of him, which took only a few seconds. A gigantic tentacle lifted and came down toward him.

Instinctively, he raised a hand and shouted "Baohu!" Sparks flew from his hand and a shimmering protective shield appeared between him and the tentacle...and then quickly flickered out.

The tentacle came down hard, right on top of him, slamming him into the ground for the second time. Then it lifted away, and another one replaced it, attacking him again. Reacting quickly, he rolled and the second tentacle only

caught his shoulder. Half a second slower and he'd be seriously injured or dead; as it was, he was in a whole lot more pain than before.

Then even more of the beast's tentacles were coming after him, raised high in the air and already slamming down toward the ground. He tried to push himself to his feet, but his arms didn't want to respond. Another tentacle clipped him and he went flying—again—landing a few meters away. The good news was that it gave him a bit of breathing room before the next assault. The bad news was that the repeated impacts were really adding up—the pain started making everything a little blurry.

Rather than get up, he marshaled all the focus he could. He crossed both of his hands in front of him and shouted, "Shaoshang!" A gout of flame emanated from his hands and flew toward the gigantic squid creature, but whereas he expected this sorcery to last for most of a minute, it gave him a mere ten seconds and flamed out as though it had run out of fuel.

Still, it was enough to have an effect. The thing shrieked again, one of its tentacles now alight, and it beat that tentacle against the ground, trying to put it out. Which did not take long at all—just enough time for Yingl to pick himself back up to his feet.

"This is going well," he said with as much irony as he could muster while he prepared one more spell, hoping it would be enough to allow him to avoid being this thing's lunch. But before the expected strike came, he heard the unmistakable sound of a shotgun firing and then a spray of dark blue ichor flew from the side of the squid. It shrieked yet again and turned toward the source of the gunfire. Rage filled the features that mostly qualified as its face.

Yingl looked where it was focusing and spotted a dark-skinned man. The man reloaded his shotgun and fired twice more, hitting the thing at center mass. More blue ichor spattered out of its fresh wounds.

Despite the ichor and torn up flesh, it didn't seem particularly slowed down by the gunfire. But it was distracted enough to allow the man to run through the beast's field of vision. He held out a hand toward Yingl as he sprinted.

"Come on," the man shouted in heavily accented English—Australian, maybe—as he approached. "We have to get out of here!" But the beast only

momentarily distracted and was already on the attack again, sending tentacles toward the two of them.

“No,” Yingl shouted back. “This way!” He turned back toward the slope he’d spotted earlier.

The man slowed his run and looked incredulous. “What?! Are you looking to get killed?”

Yingl shouted, “Trust me!” He ran toward what he hoped was the spot he appeared in this wretched landscape. He couldn’t see if the man was following him, but based on the sound of tentacles slapping the ground behind him, he didn’t think he had too many other options.

When he passed through the spot, exactly where he had hoped it would be, he felt the transition; the suddenness of it threw him off his balance, and he went flying—yet one more time—and landed in the much cooler Netherworld with a bruising thud.

“Fuck,” he thought as he lay there in agony. “I lost the case again.”

Then, Max Lancaster, who had been following his flight from the giant squid, flew through the portal and landed on him.

# Hypersonic Train, Mars, 2125

Hiroshi Kata stared out the window of the train, idly watching the blurred landscape rush by at around twelve hundred kilometers per hour. Mostly it was a never-ending series of linked hydroponic farms—domed plots placed over scientifically enhanced soil—interspersed with red Martian ground covered with the hearty succulents that had successfully taken root and spread all across the planet since humanity had settled here.

And dust, the endless clouds of rust-laden dust that gave Mars its distinct reddish hues. Someday it could rain here, and that would finally start washing away all of that dust. Maybe Kata would live to see that day, if he maintained the balance between his chi and his cybernetics. It would be something worth living for, no matter what life might bring.

But that was the future. For now, Kata had something more pressing. So he turned away from the blurred landscape and focused on his hand terminal. He tapped a pair of digital buttons, and seconds later the smiling, elderly face of Tamara Yumi, the nominal leader of the Martian government greeted him.

“Hiroshi-sama,” she said with a quiet deference. “I am honored to take your call.”

“Prefect, you look well.” Kata’s use of her title indicated this call would be business, and they would get to it quickly.

Yumi understood this and got right to it: “What can I do for you, Hiroshi-sama?”

“I need an open-ended launch authorization, black clearance.”

Yumi didn’t respond immediately, clearly taking a second to think this over.

“When?”

“Ignition will be in one hour.”

The image on the terminal shook her head. “I don’t think I can do that, the Planetary Parliament will object.”

“Tamara-san, the parliament doesn’t have to be informed.”

Her already wrinkled brow furrowed,



“Song-sama will object. Jigoku is strictly forbidden, even to the Kazoku.”

Kata dismissed that notion quickly. “He doesn’t have to know either.”

“He will know as soon as I sign the order.”

“Prefect,” Kata said, shifting back to her title with an edge of menace in his voice. “Unless you tell him yourself, by the time he knows it won’t matter.”

“Hiroshi-sama,” she responded, her tone shifting toward a plea. “He will end me.”

Kata took a deep breath before responding. “If you do not do this, I will launch anyway. Your signature is merely a formality. When that happens, the Parliament will call for an early election and it will not go well for you.”

“And if I do this, Song will do the same, but worse.”

“He will not, because he will know that I gave you no choice. Song will never punish loyalty and obedience. His wrath will be focused entirely upon me, and I will deal with that when the time comes.”

Yumi’s frown deepened. She clearly didn’t trust that outcome, but now Kata had left her with two bad options. He needed her to choose the less immediate option.

“I need assurances. I want your guarantee of support for the Tendo expansion project.”

An attempt at negotiation was a good sign. She was trying to find some way to justify doing something she might regret.

“Expensive. You ask a lot.”

“Not as much as you, Hiroshi-sama.”

Kata took a moment to consider this, though in truth there was no consideration at all. He was prepared to make concessions, but he needed to not appear to give in too quickly.

“Very well,” he said after a moment. “I will support your project, and you will understand it is otherwise not in my best interest to have done so.”

Then the frown was replaced with a smile. “Of course, Hiroshi-sama, I am honored to do you this favor in return for all you have done for me, and the Tamara family, and for Mars. It shall be done.”

Her voiced shifted from pleasant back to strained. “Is there anything else I can

do for you this morning, honored Hiroshi-sama?" He could practically hear her begging him to say no.

"Thank you, Prefect, but that is all I need. I assure you, your loyalty and service will be rewarded."

She looked down from the monitor in deference. "Thank you, Hiroshi-sama. Until next time." Then the call disconnected.

Then, with another tap against the glass terminal in his hand, Sheng's face reappeared.

"Hiroshi-sama," he greeted.

"Sheng, you have your clearance. Is the team assembled?"

"Hideyoshi, and Snowmark are on L4 and will meet us at Hohmann Alpha."

"Good. Launch is in fifty-five minutes. I'll arrive in thirty. Be ready to lift off as soon as I'm aboard."

"Yes, Hiroshi-sama." Sheng's face disappeared, leaving only the glowing interface on the terminal.

*You're playing with fire, Kata. But that fire will be quenched by rain.*

He closed his eyes. Lulled by the sounds of the train, he allowed himself a twenty minute nap before his arrival at the Mars Interstellar Spaceport.

# Flashback: CDCA Lab, The Netherworld, 2020

Lo Kan smiled at the woman standing across from him, trying not to eye the black case in her right hand, but failing to do so. He just needed to get through this conversation, then he would have the last piece he needed to complete the task he'd been assigned four years ago.

"Dr. Villaverde, I will find your modified arcanowave link most useful."

Laura Villaverde responded with a curt, "I'm sure you will." She wasn't interested in pleasantries, and she also didn't seem to be in a hurry to hand over the case. "But...you haven't found a portal to 2081 yet."

"There are none, Doctor, I assure you. I have searched high and low, and used every trick in the book. That juncture is closed."

Laura's already dour countenance shifted into a frown. "That shouldn't have happened."

"Portals have always been unstable. Whenever the balance of chi changes, there is a cost. Perhaps the chi changed there in ways we cannot understand."

She sighed. "You're absolutely certain? There's...nothing? No way to get there?"

Lo Kan shook his head. "No, Doctor. I've used every trick I know, tried every contact in the Underworld I know. There are many secret passages in the Netherworld, and they know them all. If one existed, they could be compelled to tell me. And they cannot."

"Fine. This gift is contingent upon you continuing to look, and letting me know if things change."

"Of course, Doctor. It is in my best interest to keep this relationship strong. Give my regards to Dr. Boatman."

"I'm sure," she said without emotion. She set the case gently on the floor, then walked out, past the two abominations that silently guarded the entrance to the laboratory.

Lo Kan retrieved the case, checked its contents, then took it deeper into the lab to deliver it to his leader.

Homo Omega had changed in the four years since he had been reborn. Successive cybernetic modifications had increased the power, agility, and durability of the Nachtshreck unit's frame, and repeated gene therapy had made the Omega chromosome more pronounced. In appearance, he was much more abomination than human, but there was nothing demonic in his essential nature.

Lo Kan had never expected to shift his allegiance from the CDCA, but this new, upgraded version of Homo Omega seemed more thoughtful and less purely destructive than the one that had tried to turn every human being on Earth into a mindless abomination. Ultimately, Lo Kan simply could not resist perfection. This new Omega was perfect in every way, to his eye.

"Your mission appears to have been successful, Lo Kan," Omega said as Lo Kan handed the case to the waiting arcanoscientist.

"Indeed, but I get the sense that Dr. Villaverde's cooperation will be ceasing soon."

Omega remained expressionless. "Her time at the CDCA is about to end. Regardless, we will have no further need of her."

"I hope so," Lo Kan responded.

Desdemona Deathangel swept into the room, followed by a CHAR unit. Despite how terrifying she looked, her blood red smile put Lo Kan at bit more at ease. He knew the effect was—literally—magical, stemming from the demon she had been before the CDCA had transformed her. Still, knowing that did not diminish the sensation whatsoever.

"Darlings, are we ready?"

Omega turned to the arcanoscientist. "Indeed. Doctor, are you ready to proceed?"

"Yes, Director, Dr Villaverde's modifications should allow us to complete the work."

"Good." He pointed at the CHAR unit, and then at a standing capsule. "You, into the pod."

The CHAR unit obeyed without hesitation, and then the scientist began

hooking it up to the machinery. In the meantime, Omega entered an identical pod, right next to the CHAR unit's.

Desdemona clapped her hands together, unable to contain her excitement. "Ooooh, I can't wait! This is going to be **great!**"

The arcanoscientist tapped a few buttons on the console, performed one last check of all the connections, then announced the process would begin.

The equipment started humming, then more loudly whining. Suddenly the CHAR unit, which had been utterly silent until this moment, let out a loud, pained howl. Its exoskeleton started to bubble, and the entire unit began to grow.

In about fifteen minutes—which seemed like forever to Lo Kan, who had long since become weary of the unit's howls—the process stopped, and both the machinery and the unit went silent again. The arcanoscientist checked the console and declared, "The Omega transfer process is complete. One hundred percent success."

Omega disconnected himself from his capsule and stepped out to observe the upgrades on the CHAR unit. Desdemona practically jumped on him and draped her arms around Omega's shoulders, causing her feathery wings to obscure Lo Kan's view of the unit.

"Ohhh, me next, me next!" It always astounded Lo Kan that such a beautiful and deadly creature could sound so excitable and pure. Sometimes the dichotomy was unsettling.

"I believe that would be unwise, Desdemona."

Her voice fell. "But, darling, if I'm to be the mother of your new species, I'll need the Omega gene!"

Omega responded dispassionately, "It is not a gene, it is a chromosome. They will receive the Omega chromosome the same way this one did, via the arcanowave link."

"That doesn't sound nearly as fun as what I had in mind."

Omega looked at her flatly. "Did you expect physical procreation?"

She laughed. "Of course, my darling? Didn't you?"

"Desdemona, I am not capable of that. And even if I were, you kill and feast upon anyone you copulate with."

“Oh. Not you. That would never happen with you.”

“You cannot control it, Desdemona. It is in your nature.”

“But...you could fix it! If you give me your gene—”

“Chromosome,” Omega corrected again.

“—then it’d be like normal people making love.”

“You suggest an evolved cyborg and a technologically enhanced demonic seducer should copulate?”

Lo Kan couldn’t help but chuckle. Omega turned and looked at Lo Kan quizzically. “What are you laughing at?”

“You made a joke.”

“I did not.” He paused. “Though I can see how you might perceive it that way.”

Desdemona, on the other hand, was not amused. “Please, darling?”

“You are an abomination. We do not know precisely what the Omega chromosome will do to you, as it was designed to evolve cybernetically enhanced humans. We do not know that it will go as you desire.”

Desdemona wrapped her arms around Omega’s shoulders, who did not respond to the gesture in any fashion.

“It will bring me closer to you, and that is the only thing I desire.”

“You are indeed quite valuable. That value must be recognized. Very well,” he relented. He motioned to the arcanoscientist. “Begin the preparations.”

*So that was the play Desdemona had been making*, Lo Kan thought. He knew full well about Desdemona’s capacity for deceit, and he’d never truly believed she was capable of love. This, however, made sense to him: the Omega chromosome would free her from any controls implanted in her, and would only make her much, much more dangerous. She was already the most dangerous abomination he knew of. What would her ceiling be?

# Hohmann Station Alpha, Earth Orbit, 2125

Hiroshi Kata watched the iris door open, bridging the airlock of his interplanetary transport to Hohmann Station Alpha. This station was one of four transfer stations between Earth orbit and other destinations in the solar system—primarily Mars but also the orbital city at LaGrange Four and the station at Ceres.

After the two airlocks had properly pressurized, the inner door opened. Kata and Sheng floated through.

“Welcome to Hohmann Alpha, Hiroshi-sama,” the security officer said once they had traversed the airlock. “You’re expected at C&C.”

“Take me there.”

“Of course,” the officer said. “This way.”

They made their way through the station to Command and Control, which was at the outer part of the station and thus had a light amount of spin gravity. While it was significantly less gravity than Mars, and of course a great deal less than Earth, it was enough that they stood on the deck rather than floated over it.

In Command and Control, they were greeted by the station commander, an older man named Sato who wore the nearly military uniform of Stellaris Corp.

“Hiroshi-sama, it is good to see you again,” Commander Sato greeted them. “On behalf of Stellaris, welcome back to Hohmann Station Alpha!”

Kata had no memory of meeting Sato before, but his quick appraisal of the man was that he was a dull, officious bureaucrat mostly interested in maintaining the status quo. It had been many, many years since these transfer stations were considered important, so Sato was probably put here to keep him out of the way—perhaps someone else in his family was owed a favor.

“Thank you for your gracious hospitality, Commander,” Kata responded with drab politeness. “We are very grateful to you and Stellaris Corp for receiving us.”

“Yes, and Stellaris Corp does appreciate that. But if you’ll pardon me, sir, I



wasn't briefed on the purpose of your visit."

"Indeed," Kata agreed. "You were not."

This seemed to deflate Sato, as the man visibly realized his lack of importance here.

"Then, may I humbly ask how we may serve you?"

"I need a shuttle to Jigoku, for four men. The other two are arriving from L4 in about six hours. In three days, five hundred will follow us down, once we have established a landing zone."

"Oh. Oh! Oh my, I'm afraid, no, I'm afraid that won't be possible. There are no landing clearances on Jigoku except for the drones, sir."

Kata offered Sato a datapad. "I believe you'll find my MarsGov clearance to be in order. It could not be transmitted on the net as this is a top level classified affair. But when you check, you will find Prefect Tamara's cryptosignature is easily verified."

Sato took the datapad from Kata, his hand visibly shaking. "Direct from the Prefect herself? Oh my, this is completely unorthodox. I'll have to check with Stellaris Corp HQ."

"If a word of this touches the net, I assure you your assignment as Commander of this station—or any facility under the jurisdiction of MarsGov—will be completed. I'm certain you'll be free to retire in Tendo. You have earned your pension, haven't you?"

Sato's eyes widened. "Yes, uh, very good, Hiroshi-sama." He looked at the datapad, then tapped a couple of keys to transfer the order to the station's computer. After the authentication was confirmed, he handed the datapad back.

"Okay, it will take a few days to get a shuttle ready—"

Hirosha cleared his throat. "My compatriots will be here in six hours. You have eight."

"But sir," Sato whined. "There simply isn't—"

"Don't but sir me, Commander. I am intimately familiar with this station's protocols and readiness. You can have a shuttle ready for me in four hours. Eight gives you enough time to run through the safety checklist twice. Now—get on it, or your first officer will be given the opportunity to follow orders with less

whining.”

“I, uh, yes sir.” Sato turned away and said something into the communicator on his wrist, then he turned back.

“Uh, Hiroshi-sama, I hate to be a nuisance, but I need to know—where do you intend to land?”

“Hmm,” Kata answered with less gruffness than before. “We need to see the latest recon information to determine that.”

“Ahh, of course. Give me a moment, and I’ll put it up on the monitor.”

Sato did so, and the monitor that had previously been displaying status information on the station’s systems flashed to a list of photos and textual analysis. It scrolled through pictures of various places—most of North America was just desert inland, and submerged, empty cities on both coasts. The vast jungles in South America had been reduced to a few scattered clumps of trees.

As the photos scrolled, something must have caught Sheng’s eye. “Is that...a badger?”

“Wait, ah, let me scroll back,” Sato responded. “Ahh, yes, there it is.” The monitor showed an aerial photo of a badger, walking through the remains of a European city. The creature was something on the order of five stories tall.

“Well, that is not very auspicious,” Sheng said.

Kata chuckled lightly. “I’m surprised there’s anything alive at all, let alone anything...that large.”

“Ah yes, uh, there’s...rather a lot of mutated creatures like this wandering around Jigoku, Sheng-sama. They have grown more and more commonplace over the last few years.”

“Show me Tokyo,” Kata demanded.

“Of course, one second, sir, while I pull it up.”

The monitor filled with a series of images of the former capital of Japan. The buildings were half underwater, dark and lifeless. Kata felt an almost physical pain viewing this imagery. Tokyo was his birthplace, had been his home. He had built a life and a fortune there.

He knew this was what he would see, but somehow despite this, he was unprepared for actually seeing it.

"Hiroshi-sama," Sheng said after a moment's silence. "I recommend Hong Kong."

"Ah yes of course, Hong Kong," Sato said. "There are unusual signs of activity there. Perhaps some people migrated in from the north. It has been uninhabited for years, but something has changed lately."

"Fine," Kata agreed. "It's your call, Sheng-san."

"Prep the shuttle for Hong Kong, Commander," Sheng said. "And this is need to know only. You tell no one anything about this that they don't absolutely need to know. Understood?"

"Of course, Sheng-sama."

Kata closed his eyes for a moment. He was taking longer to recover from what he had seen than he hoped. When he opened them, Hong Kong was on the screen. Sure, the city was a ruin, but unlike Tokyo it was surrounded by greenery: trees, flowers, birds, and wildlife.

And just as importantly, in the bottom right image, it was raining.

Just feeling the rain would be worth it.

# Hong Kong, Earth, 2023

Yingl Bojue strode through the doors to the Hong Kong workshop, followed by Max, the darker-skinned warrior who had saved his life in the desert. After chatting with him in the Netherworld, Yingle had wasted no time coming to Angie Dao for advice. But he knew that a meeting with her might be uncomfortable for him.

Angie Dao looked up from a workbench as soon as the pair entered the room. She quickly turned off the butane torch she'd been using on...some kind of equipment, and raised her safety goggles to rest on her lightly tanned forehead. This revealed a youthful yet clearly care-worn face.

That face cycled through a range of emotions just as quickly as the words left her mouth. "Yingl! Did you get the arcanowave transducer? Who did you bring with you?"

He started to respond. "I—"

"And good grief, what's wrong with your face?"

That one surprised him. He reached up to touch his face, and as soon as he touched his right cheekbone, a sharp sensation of pain radiated out from the spot. That must be one of the places the giant squid had hit him. Or maybe he'd landed on his face? He couldn't remember—at this point it was all a blur.

"Well I—"

"I think maybe you should see a doctor. Also who is this person?"

"Well he—"

But Angie didn't even pause for him to answer. "And where is my transducer?"

Yingl lost his patience and shouted, "Angie! Can I answer a question before you ask another one?"

Angie blinked and looked surprised.

"Oh right. I forgot how slow you think." She raised a hand and waved. "But make it quick, I don't want to lose my place on this equipment."

Yingl sighed and tried to choose his words carefully. "First, no I don't have

the transducer. Sec—”

“Why the hell not?!”

“Would you believe a thirty foot squid took it?”

Angie frowned. “No, no I would not.”

“Well then,” Yingl responded. “We’re going to have a bit of a problem, because that’s what happened.”

Max interjected in his strong Australian accent. “It didn’t take it, really, it just knocked it out of your hands.”

Yingl started to get exasperated. “Fine, whatever. It’s somewhere in the future.”

Angie’s frowned deepened. “Where in the future? Wait no that can’t be, there is no future. That closed a few years ago!”

“I don’t know exactly when. It’s—” he paused just long enough to find the words. “—not the future we knew. Maybe some other time, or maybe some shift?”

Angie pointed at Max. “I take it this one is from there?”

“Yes, that’s what I’ve been trying to get to.”

Angie’s frown turned into genuine curiosity. “Wait wait, wait. So you, whoever you are, tell me your story.”

Max piped up without hesitation. “Not much to tell. The world’s screwed. There’s stories that once it wasn’t, and there’s a lot of signs it wasn’t, but it’s all just wasteland, ruins, giant monsters, mutants, and bands of people struggling to survive.”

“Ugh, so there was a critical shift and now things are even worse?!”

“I don’t know what that means,” Max answered.

“What year is it?”

Max shrugged. “Uhh. There’s some old papers we have that say 2083 but those are all from before I was born.”

Angie finally stepped away from the workbench.

“I’m Max, by the by.”

“Angie,” she answered distractedly while approaching Yingl. She looked up at his bruised face. “Let me get this straight. Somehow you ended up in the

future juncture. You got beaten up by a giant...did you say squid?"

"Yes."

"Okay, a giant squid. You lost my transducer. You found this guy."

"Yes."

"Good. Why are you here without my transducer?"

"I figured the future juncture being opened up was important. And a thirty foot squid was trying to turn me into jelly, and I thought it was more important to not be jelly. Plus Max needs our help."

"Oh you did, did you? Boatman is building up an army of abominations in the Netherworld, looking to invade Hong Kong, and remake the world in his image, **again**, and I need that transducer to build a defense against a hundred thousand abominations. And the only other person who could do this is stuck in the Netherworld where that's not at all helpful. You really think this is more important?"

"Well, no, maybe not more important, but this new future is a twisted hellscape. It's exactly the kind of thing I signed up to try and fight against."

She scratched at a spot just below the safety goggles on her forehead with her thumb, clearly trying to control her temper. "And have you yet successfully fought against any of it?"

"Well, not exactly no."

"That's right. Because you can't fight against it if you don't have chi. The world doesn't let you."

"Damn it, Angie, what am I supposed to do then?"

"You go back to wherever it is you lost my transducer. You get my transducer. Then I build the thing that will keep Hong Kong from drowning in abominations. Then you can worry about the future."

"We need help **now**," Max exclaimed. "There's more sand squid in the desert than ever, not to mention the mutants. We're running out of fuel and ammunition, and we can't manufacture any more."

"Okay, fine. Some supplies we can get you, and maybe we can kill a few squids or maybe we can get some of you out of the wasteland and into the Netherworld. Okay?"

“Sure,” Max said without sounding convinced. “Whatever help we can get.”

“And make sure this bozo,” she said jabbing a finger into Yingl’s chest, “comes back with my transducer. Otherwise there will be **two** twisted hellscapes to worry about, not just one. And I’d miss this place.”

Yingl started to rub his eyes, but the pain from brushing against his bruises put a quick stop to that.

“Come on, Angie, I’m doing the best I can, there’s no call to be like that.”

She looked Yingl in the eyes. “Get me the transducer, and I’ll take it back. I’ll call you a hero instead of a bozo. Got it? I don’t mean to seem single-minded, but we’re running against a clock here. You know where to get what they need. Now go.”

Yingl muttered under his breath, but Angie was already done with the conversation, on her way back to the workbench. The safety goggles were back over her eyes and those eyes were intent upon whatever she had been doing with the torch.

“Come on, I know someone we can get. Jim will hate me for this, but he owes me a favor.”

As they exited, Max asked, “Is it always like this?”

“Enh,” Yingl said with a shrug. “Not really no. But kind of yes. I...look, let’s just say it’s hard to do the right thing all the time, when it seems like every day the world’s about to end.”

“For you,” Max responded. “For us, that happened years ago.”

“Yeah. Let’s see what we can do about that. We need some chi and I know just where to start.”



# Hong Kong, Earth, 2125

Hiroshi Kata stepped through the landing shuttle's doors almost before they had finished opening. He took only three steps once his boots hit the soft earth, just enough to let the rest of the team behind him also step out into what used to be—a lifetime ago—Hong Kong Park.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He felt the much stronger pull of the Earth's gravity, grateful for the advanced cybernetics that helped to compensate for a body that had grown accustomed, after fifty years, to Mars' much lower gravity than Earth. He inhaled deeply, and a thousand different scents filled his nostrils—flora, fauna, pollen, soil—smells from a jungle he had not experienced in a long, long time.

"Hiroshi-sama?" Forest Sheng, standing just behind him, clearly was less impressed with the vegetation here.

"Patience, Sheng-san. You've never set foot on Earth. Treasure this moment, you'll never have another first step on this world again."

"Indeed," Sheng responded with some hesitation.

Behind Sheng, the other two members of the team, Snowmark and Hideyoshi, looked around in wonder. Like Sheng, they too had been born on Mars. Likely, neither of them had ever dreamed of setting foot on this planet. Yet, here they were.

Unlike Sheng or Hideyoshi, Snowmark had been in the first wave of births on Mars, the first of the first generation Martian natives. Formally she was employed by Aramax Security, the company responsible for just over half of the private security around Mars and its colonies, but years ago Kata had her assigned to his personal retinue. She operated more or less as a free agent, which had proven valuable on a number of occasions. Snowmark was effective and loyal, and she cared deeply about matters of honor.

"However, Hiroshi-sama, we do have a mission."

Hiroshi sighed. The young, so impetuous! Some things seemed to always be true, no matter how much time or how many generations or how many different

worlds were involved.

“As promised, Sheng-san, this is your mission. Lead on.”

“Please, honorable Hiroshi-sama, call me Forest.”

“As you prefer, Forest-san.”

“The Dragon’s notes said there used to be a portal in the Archaeological Building, on the south side of the park. It should be a short trip that way.”

The direction Sheng pointed contained mostly trees, but beyond them Kata could see the irregular skyline of long abandoned skyscrapers.

“I remember it. It took quite some amount of chi to sense it, though.”

“Then it is fortuitous that you came along, Hiroshi-sama.”

\* \* \*

“This is the third past portal location we’ve tried, Forest-san, and I still sense no portals nearby.” Kata looked flatly at Sheng, who stood in a foot deep of brackish water, surrounded by what used to be medium-tall office buildings.

Sheng scowled. “There has to be one here. The recon images could only have been an Inner Walker.”

“If I were to guess, I would imagine that when the portals re-opened, they were all in new locations. I suspect, as far as The Netherworld is concerned, this is a different juncture.”

“Then how would you propose we find one?”

“I must meditate upon this question.” Kata closed his eyes, taking a moment to focus and center his chi. He could almost hear Hideyoshi rolling his eyes, but this was the best idea he had. He extended his senses, as best he could, seeking the tell-tale signs of chi.

But the world was silent—until he heard a splash. Kata held one hand up, motioning for quiet. He moved, carefully, in the direction of the sound, pressing himself up against the wall of a building to try and remain unseen, at least until he had appraised the situation.

He saw three figures. The first was a man with a wide-brimmed hat, fairly normal looking. But the other two—he recognized one of them. Some kind of cyborg, and the winged abomination known as Desdemona Deathangel. Rumors of her death must have been exaggerated. Though weren’t her wings supposed

to be feathery, like the angel she was named for? Despite being wiped out of time by the critical shift, some of the Buro must still be around in the Netherworld.

“Ready weapons,” Kata said under his breath. But just as they were doing so, an object plopped into the water just outside the alleyway they were in. Kata grabbed Sheng without thinking, pushing him out of what he hoped would be the explosion radius of that grenade.

Said grenade exploded under the water, making first a muffled thump immediately followed by a much louder sound akin to stone grinding against stone. The force knocked him and Sheng down into the water; fortunately, they were both far enough away that they were relatively unscathed.

Sheng quickly sprang back to his feet. Hideyoshi and Snowmark recovered similarly. Sheng asked Kata, “How many?”

“Three, at least. Maybe more I couldn’t see,” Kata replied.

“Three? We can take three.” Sheng pointed to Hideyoshi. “Take point, let’s rush them.”

“Wait,” Kata called, but it was too late. On Sheng’s order, Hideyoshi turned and ran out of the alleyway, guns blazing, with Snowmark and Sheng close beyond.

Kata cursed silently. Had he been younger, he would have reacted swiftly enough to temper Sheng’s enthusiasm. But now he had no choice but to join them; no matter how rash the decision, he would not abandon the heir to the Dragon here.

As they ran into the alley, the trio of enemies quickly retreated. Sheng raised his rifle and cheered jubilantly. But mere seconds later, the portal they had been seeking opened, and a whole squad of cyborgs poured out of it. A mixture of fire and bullets filled the street. Hideyoshi went down immediately, then Sheng.

Kata and Snowmark opened fire on the cyborgs, while running to Sheng, despite the hail of gunfire. Sheng, still alive, though clearly wounded in multiple places, struggled to pick himself up. Kata, in a quick, practiced move, hoisted Sheng up and helped him stand. Snowmark helped from the other side.

Together, the three of them ran, the best they could, back into the alley. Kata felt at least one bullet hit him, but it was in his cybernetic arm and didn’t affect

the structure.

Once in the alley, they kept going, assuming pursuit would be close behind. Somehow, though, it wasn't—no one, not the cyborgs, not the man with the hat, and not the bat-winged killer had come after them.

Kata decided to take a moment to breathe and check on Sheng, who he and Snowmark were practically carrying together. He found a likely spot, and helped Sheng sit.

Sheng looked up at him, clearly in shock, bleeding from no less than six bullet wounds across his torso. But he smiled at Kata. "We—we did it. We found the portal."

And then Sheng passed out.

# Hong Kong, Earth, 2125, Moments Earlier

Lo Kan stepped through the portal, followed by Homo Omega and Desdemona Deathangel. As soon as they were through, their boots splashed into a foot or so of standing water, sinking slightly into the silt which compacted into the concrete that, once upon a time, was a street in Hong Kong.

Omega looked around, quickly absorbing their new surroundings. His eyes scanned past the crumbling, abandoned skyscrapers, covered with vines, resting in still, smelly saltwater. Then his eyes went to Lo Kan. "It is as you said. This juncture is nothing like any of the others. Ruins as far as the eye can see. Is this typical in this time?"

"Everything else is worse. Most of Asia is just desolate wasteland, where very little even grows. Here, it seems the jungles have returned. But more importantly, there are no rulers of note here. Magic is greatly suppressed, and chi itself seems weak. Mutated monsters roam much of the countryside, but many of them can be controlled, turned to our purposes."

"But," Desdemona protested, "It's also...boring."

Lo Kan turned and looked directly at Desdemona. He was always somewhere between surprised and impressed at what the Omega gene had done to her—perhaps some of her ethereal beauty had diminished—but she seemed generally more imposing. Her black, feathery wings had been transformed into leathery bat-like wings, shifting her appearance from angelic to demonic. As well, an aura of power surrounded her now that wasn't there before. And, to Lo Kan's mind, some of the child-like nature that she had always emanated seemed suppressed.

"Boring, perhaps, but perfect for our use. We must assume others will find the juncture soon, but we appear to have a head start. We can begin gathering chi before they do."

"I still think." Desdemona replied, "2023 should be our target."

"No," Omega interjected. "That was our best opportunity before we found

this place. New information causes us to adjust our strategy. There is always uncertainty in a war. Our odds are significantly higher if we—you and I—can amass a significant amount of chi before anyone else. We have the resources to guard it against any incursion. The natural dangers of this place should slow our enemies down. We will have more freedom to build here than we would in the Netherworld. An invasion of 2023 would be slow. It would take years, perhaps decades, and chi itself is unpredictable, even to me. It resists.”

“But here,” Lo Kan continued the thought, “there is little chi to resist us.”

Desdemona wrinkled her nose. “But this...this is just ruins. I don’t want to rule ruins!”

Omega proffered a rare smile to Desdemona. “For now. We can remake this world in our image. We can populate it with our children. We merely need vigilance and patience.”

Desdemona practically glared at Omega. “Two qualities you know very well I lack, darling.”

“Consider the facts. Do you want to give your children the best opportunity you can? In 2023, we would have to destroy most of humanity before we could even begin. Here, that step has already been skipped. It reduces the scale of our effort by years.”

Desdemona looked around, then sighed.

“I want a palace.”

“If that is what you desire, it can be built.”

“And I want—”

Omega interrupted Desdemona with a sharp noise and a raised hand. “We are not alone.” He looked around, his eyes quickly focusing on a small disturbance in the water in a nearby alley. He raised his rifle and looked through the viewfinder.

“Four humans,” he reported. “Cyborgs, but not of a kind I recognize. No arcanowave signature at all.”

“Shadow Syndicate, maybe,” Lo Kan replied.

“That is not a term I am familiar with, Lo Kan.”

“When the critical shift happened, a few years after you died, they were the

ones that inherited your juncture. I never learned much about them, they were especially secretive, but they controlled the juncture starting around 2068 completely for a few years. Then they disappeared.”

“Cybernetics without using arcanowaves, that could be useful.” He hefted his rifle, pressed a button on the side, aimed and fired. A large, slow-moving projectile launched from the rifle and landed in the water in a small alleyway between two decrepit buildings. A split second later, the projectile exploded in the water, taking chunks out of both buildings and scattering bits of concrete into the water.

Several voices shouted in a language Lo Kan did not understand, and four figures ran out of the alleyway, firing a hail of bullets toward Lo Kan and company. Homo Omega and Desdemona dove for cover, and Lo Kan tried to flatten himself against a building, using the corner as cover from the gunfire. Then he pressed a button on the device strapped to his wrist.

The voices that had emerged from the explosion sounded triumphant, clearly believing they had gotten the upper hand. But Lo Kan’s signal summoned a small host of Nachtshreck and CHAR units through the portal. The jubilant shouts turned into distressed howls. He couldn’t understand the words, but they clearly called for a retreat.

Lo Kan risked peeking around the corner. Two of the men were helping a third back into the alleyway, and a fourth was laying in the water, not moving. Desdemona started to pursue, but Homo Omega stopped her.

“Desdemona, hold! We have what we need!”

She turned and growled at Homo Omega, her eyes glittering with an almost feral look. “But the **hunt!**”

“No, we do not know if they have reinforcements. There is no value in running into a trap.” He pointed at the fallen body. “They left one of theirs behind, and one is wounded. We have what we need for now. We can be circumspect about dealing with them.”

Desdemona looked at the body with raw hunger in her eyes. “Can I eat him?”

“Not yet. We need to study his augmentations. They could be useful.”

Desdemona shrieked, and the sound was utterly terrifying, echoing off the



walls of the dilapidated buildings, amplified and distorted.

Omega put a hand on her shoulder. "Patience, Desdemona. There will be many opportunities to satiate your thirst."

She turned and glared at Omega. "There had **better** be." But then her gaze softened, and she smiled. "You're right, though. This place might be more fun than I thought."

"Yes," Omega agreed. "Your opportunities for hunting will be endless, here."

# Hong Kong, Earth, 2125, Moments Earlier

Yingl Bojue stepped out of portal, but instead of the hard, superheated rock he expected to find, he found a foot of warm, brackish water covering what used to be a street. Max and Jim followed him out, each making successfully bigger splashes as they landed in the smelly, salty water.

Max looked down at the water lapping against his boots. "What the hell is this, Yingl?"

"That's a very good question. Jim?"

Jim held his hands up in protest. "Don't look at me, man, this was your portal. I've never been here before."

"But you're supposed to be the **expert** on portals."

"Man oh man," the tall, spindly man responded. "Expertise on portals really just means remembering where all of the portals we know about go. Don't tell you squat about where some new portal might or might not go."

"Shit. Just yesterday this landed in a desert. Today it's...what is this?"

Yingl looked around. He was surrounded by tall, long abandoned buildings that were barely holding together. Vines had grown up and covered some of the buildings. Entry doors were overgrown with foliage, some of them simply ripped off their hinges by the greenery.

Jim looked around, idly pulling at his mustache. "Clearly a city in China."

"What gave it away, Jim? The Chinese writing on the signs?"

"Stop being a smartass."

"Sorry, can't. Don't know how. Besides I—oh. I know exactly where we are."

Jim looked at Yingl. "And how is that?"

Yingl pointed at a building across the flooded street. "Recognize that? It's Angie's workshop. Or was. Clearly that was a long, long time ago."

Jim followed the pointing finger and, once Yingl had said it, recognition dawned on him.

“Okay,” Jim said. “Okay, I knew this was going to be the ruins of the world I once knew, but...man it’s much harder than I thought it’d be.”

Max interjected with his accented speech, “Look, I’m glad you know where we are now, but that doesn’t help us. We need to get back to my village! I don’t know how long we’ve been gone, but they need us.”

“Yeah,” Yingl agreed. “Come on, let’s get back through the portal and try again.”

Yingl stepped through where they entered, but...nothing happened. Bewildered, he tried again, but the result was the same.

“Fuck,” Yingl exclaimed. “It was **right here.**”

Jim tried as well. Same result.

“Well, Yingl. I don’t think that portal you found is very stable.”

“No shit, Jim. Now who’s being the smartass?”

Max groaned out loud. “Oh for fuck’s sake. It’s just one thing after another with you!”

“Hey,” Yingl protested. “It’s not **my** fault!”

“Maybe not, but shit sure follows you around.”

Yingl sighed. “Yeah, tell me about it. Okay, Jim, please tell me you can find us another portal?”

Jim shrugged. “I don’t know, man. Maybe.”

Max seemed like he was going to lose it. “Maybe?!”

“Hey, calm down,” Jim said. “This is uncharted territory here. Look, we know that when a new juncture opens up, the initial portals are unstable. They should take care of themselves.”

“Hmm,” Yingl said. “I’ve heard if you have enough chi you can force open a portal.”

“Yeah, but we don’t have a tenth of the chi between us that we’d need to do that.”

“How do we find one then?”

Jim shrugged. “I need to meditate. If there’s one close, I might be able to sense it.”

“How long is this going to take?”

“A while. You should get comfortable. Come on, let’s find a dry spot.”

\* \* \*

Hours later, Yingl and Max were accompanying Jim on his portal hunt when they heard an explosion, followed by the sound of gunfire. A few short moments later, the gunfire ceased and they heard what sounded like a group of people running through the water. Yingl moved cautiously in that direction. Shortly thereafter, he saw two men standing over a third, who was sitting in the water.

Yingl approached slowly, assuming they would be dangerous. It didn’t take long before one of them whirled around, pointing a medium sized semi-automatic right at them. He said something in a language Yingl didn’t understand. Japanese?

Yingl held both hands up, palms outward, hoping it was a peaceful gesture. He shouted in English, “Hey, uh, we’re not looking for trouble!”

The man’s eyes narrowed. It took a second, but he responded in thickly accented English. “Come no closer.”

Yingl stopped his approach, and the others followed suit behind him. “Hey, look, clearly you’re not from around here, and neither are we. Maybe we can help each other?”

Jim nudged Yingl’s shoulder and said in a low voice, “I know that guy, I think. Hiroshi or something like that. He’s Shadow Syndicate.”

The Japanese man called out, “I do not think we need your help.”

“Fine, then. Maybe you can help us? We’re looking for something.”

Just then, Yingl noticed that the man sitting in the water was bleeding profusely, and slumped over. “And—look that guy’s hurt, maybe I can help? I know a little magic.”

“Hai,” the man called out. “Fine, you help. But try anything, and I shoot you. Understand?”

Yingl moved up and examined the slumping figure. He had at least six bullet wounds, all of them open. He was soaked in his own blood. Another couple of minutes and he would probably be a dead man. Yingl knelt, crossed his hands and put both palms on the slumping man’s forehead. He summoned mystical energy and chanted, “Zhiyu, zhiyu, zhiyu.”

While he chanted, the Japanese man stuck his automatic pistol right up against the back of his neck. Yingl did his best to ignore it.

It took longer than he was accustomed to; the energy just did not seem to want to come to him in this juncture. But it did—eventually—answer his call. Purple light emanated from his hands, then covered the fallen man. After a moment, he startled awake, then coughed violently. Blood flew everywhere.

But he was awake. He said something in Japanese, and the three of them had a short conversation.

Then the one Jim had identified as Hiroshi said to Yingl, “You have my gratitude.”

“Then maybe you can help us?”

Hiroshi paused. Then smiled. “We will help you. Then our debt will be repaid.”

# Epilogue

Hiroshi Kata led Yingl Bojue and his small team to the portal where Ono Hideyoshi had fallen. Upon arriving, Kata was surprised to see that he was no longer there. Did he manage to escape? Or had the cyborgs taken him? Kata had no way of knowing, and that worried him. He hated the idea of leaving one of his own behind.

He pointed to the spot in the air where the cyborgs had poured out. "There," he said in English. "The portal."

Yingl asked, "Is it safe?"

Kata shrugged. "I cannot say. It was not safe for us. I would not presume it is safe for you." He wished his English were better. It had been, a long time ago, but he'd little call to speak English on Mars, so his skills had atrophied.

Yingl grunted and studied the air. "Jim?"

The slender, dark-skinned man Yingl called Jim closed his eyes. After a brief pause, "Yes, there's a portal there, I can sense it. I don't think there's anyone immediately on the other side, but there's no way to be sure."

"Then we have to risk it."

"Now our debt is repaid," Kata said.

"Hiroshi-sama," Snowmark said quickly, in Japanese. "This man saved Sheng-sama's life. We owe a greater debt than this."

"What would you propose?"

"I should go with them. I can help ensure it is safe. And I can report back on what I find. We are at a disadvantage with Inner Walkers. Neither you, nor Sheng-sama can be spared. But I am expendable, and I can perform a great service to both of you, as well as this man."

Kata narrowed his eyes. He did not relish the thought of losing the services of one of his most trusted samurai, but he was right—honor had its demands, and the results could be valuable.

"And if you do not come back?"

Snowmark looked down at Hiroshi's feet in a sign of respect. "Then I will

have died for your honor, Hiroshi-sama. I could not ask for a better death.”

“I do not require you to die for my honor, Snowmark. You must return.”

“Yes, Hiroshi-sama. I will endeavor to do so.”

“Sheng-san, do you agree?”

Sheng, who had been uncharacteristically quiet since his brush with death, simply nodded his assent.

Hiroshi turned to Yingl, who had been quietly watching the conversation. “Bojue-sama, we have considered. Our debt is not yet repaid. If you will accept her, my lieutenant, Snowmark, wishes to accompany you. If there is danger on the other side, she will help you fight it. She will help you complete your mission, and then I ask that you return her to us.”

“I don’t think—”

Max Lancaster prodded Yingl’s shoulder to interrupt him before he could finish. “We’ll take all the help we can get.”

“Ahh. Yes, very good then,” Yingl said. He turned to Snowmark. “Welcome aboard, I guess.”

Snowmark bowed deeply. Yingl seemed amused by the gesture, but did not return the respect. Clearly Yingl did not understand these traditions.

“Let’s go, then,” Yingl said, and led Max, Jim, and Snowmark into the portal, where they disappeared. Kata was alone with Sheng, once again.

“Well, Sheng-san. We have found the portal and the evidence you needed. We are now down two men. We should return and report. Song is not going to be happy about any of this. But at least you are alive.”

Sheng looked at the ground, then back at Kata. “No. First, we have to establish a presence. We need a secure base of operations. We need to acquire some feng shui and prepare a spirited defense. Those cyborgs are likely to be back in greater numbers. Mars must be protected from a critical shift. I am sure Song will agree.”

“Yes,” Kata agreed.

The portal activated, and the two of them immediately drew their weapons, looking for cover as they expected another squadron of cyborgs to come through. But the figure that came through was more familiar, and the absolute last person

Kata would have expected to see here.

Reflexively, Kata and Sheng both bowed deeply before her the older, silvery-haired woman.

“Forest-san,” The Dragon said. “You have been a busy boy.”

The Dragon continued toward the pair, walking with the precise grace that only a lifetime of devotion to martial arts can imbue on a person. Nothing in her movements betrayed her advanced age, only the wrinkling around her eyes and the silvery hair.

“Mother,” Sheng responded, unable—or maybe not bothering to—cover his surprise. “I—”

The Dragon turned and fixed Kata with a steely gaze. Kata viscerally felt the weight of nearly a century’s worth of leadership behind those eyes. “And you, Kata. It’s not like you to freelance like this.”

“I beg your forgiveness, Xu Mei. It seemed important enough to take the risk. But—” he paused, thinking about this sentence carefully. “—It seems that I acted on incomplete information.”

“Yes,” was all The Dragon responded with.

The silence quickly became uncomfortable, so Kata broke it. “What...what are your orders, Xu Mei?”

“You have a lot of work to do, Kata. You should have made planetfall with a hundred warriors, not just the four of you. It is unsafe here. Even with cybernetics and the best medicine can offer, age has undoubtedly slows your reflexes. Could you not have waited a few more days for the rest of the team you had assembled? That is not a mistake I would have expected from you.”

“Yes, Xu Mei. You are correct. I acted rashly.”

“I suspect it will be a long wait for them to arrive. Surviving on your own until then will contribute a great deal to restoring the trust you have eroded.”

Kata felt a wave of relief, but it was quickly displaced by a sense of anger and frustration over being in the dark over such an important detail: that The Dragon already had access to The Netherworld.

“If I may be so bold, Xu Mei, but...how many portals are already on Mars, and how long have you known?”



“Just the one, dear Kata, and I’ve known for about two weeks. I managed to open it the day you and my son left Tendo.”

“Ahh. You are indeed most powerful.”

She smiled without the slightest hint of warmth. “And you are indeed most rash for a ninety year old man.” She turned to Sheng. “And you, my disobedient son. It is clear that I have been remiss in some of your training. You will return with me and atone to Song, who you have gravely dishonored.”

“But Mother—”

“Do not talk back to me. I speak to you as The Dragon, not your mother.”

“I—yes. Of course, honorable Dragon-sama.”

Xu Mei put one hand on Sheng’s shoulder and directed him back to the portal. But before they left, she turned to Hiroshi. “Remember, Kata. The prophecy has run its course, and the future is once again unwritten. But even knowing that, our goal is not to retake this world. It is to defend the one we’ve already made. And we must do that. At any cost. Even if it means finishing the prophecy ourselves. Our time will be ending soon, even with all our power. We must make certain the next generation has a future.”

“I understand, Xu Mei.”

“Good.” And with that, The Dragon and her heir disappeared into the portal.