**The Bear That Fell From The Stars**

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**1**

The servant led Haruki Miyazaki through an opulent garden. *Green is good for the eyes*, it was often said, and Miyazaki’s traveling brown and white robes were in stark contrast to the soft foliage surrounding him. He held before him a medium sized box, carefully wrapped in fine silk from his own shop, containing the finest *sake* he could buy. A path of white stones slipped through a carpet of short grass, and huge, white and red blossoms in carefully sculpted beds greeted him on both sides. Surrounding it all, a collage of *sugi* trees, almost too beautiful to behold, towered above and dappled the earth with showers of shadow and light. The air was moist with the summer’s heat and hot to breathe. It felt as thick and intoxicating as a Zen Buddhist’s incense. Birds sang somewhere high above, giving music to the scene, and Miyazaki felt sadness in his heart.

How could a monster create such beauty?

He buried the thought by memorizing every detail of the lush grounds. The servant, a short woman with her head bowed, moved with little steps. She was perhaps in her forties, and not unattractive in her brown kimono and her dark hair tied in a bun. Miyazaki found it easier to distract himself with thoughts of her than the surrounding forest. He dared not speak to the woman for fear she was of greater value than she appeared to her master. Or worse. It was whispered that demons inhabited the gardens of the Maker in plain sight, and Miyazaki was superstitious enough to believe it. Even in a place of such serene calmness and beauty, he was only half certain of leaving without his throat cut and his flesh boiled from his bones.

They continued on without speaking, his sandals clipping off the white stones, while the woman glided across without a sound. The silk merchant suspected she was much more than she seemed, and dropped back a cautious step.

Then, the scent of water.

A pond of green and light and as unblemished as fine silver became visible to Miyazaki. The trees thinned out and a shoreline of dry stones came into sight. The silk merchant marveled at the beauty of this secret body of water, and how well the tall *sugi* trees hid it from the world.

Ahead of him, the servant stopped and gestured with an arm.

Miyazaki stopped in his tracks. A short distance away, in the shade of an old *sakura* tree laden with green, was the Maker.

 He sat cross-legged on a raised platform of *sugi* wood, staring out across the pond, watching dragonflies soar in patterns. The Maker had the air of an emperor, and his tanned features were as set and grooved as the flesh of the forest surrounding him.

 The servant glanced at Miyazaki, and they met gazes. He realized he had stopped walking.

“*Gomen nasai*,” he blurted out respectfully, just in case the woman *was* a demon in disguise. He hurried towards the edge of the lake, and the man known as the Maker.

“*Konichiwa*,” Miyazaki greeted with a deep bow and introduced himself. As he did, he offered the carefully wrapped box he had carried for days.

“*Konichiwa*,” returned the Maker, and also bowed, but not as deep. He nodded his acceptance and approval of the gift before him, and a smile played about his dark eyes. “Please sit,” he offered in formal Japanese, and gestured to the spot across from him.

Miyazaki knelt, noting that he could see the pond easily if he looked to his left. He dared not, however, not unless the Maker did so first.

“Thank you most kindly,” Miyazaki replied, bowing again.

“Something to drink?” the Maker asked.

“You are too kind,” the silk merchant replied with another bow.

“You have come a long way to see me,” the Maker said, his voice surprisingly soft for a face so stern looking. Dark hair, streaked with silver, was tied in a neat bun at the back of his skull. He raised a hand to his servant, whisking her away.

“I have a problem in my land.”

The Maker’s eyes settled on Miyazaki, mildly piqued.

 “Forgive my rash words,” Miyazaki quickly apologized with yet another bow. “It is not often I’m in the presence of someone of your importance. And reputation.”

 The Maker did not reply.

 Miyazaki feared he was a dead man. He became aware of the thunderous harmony of a thousand unseen cicadas, and he dared not move. If he did, Miyazaki knew there would be one less silk merchant in the land. And one more story to add to the legend of his host sitting across from him.

 However, the Maker’s chin dipped ever so slightly, and the relief Miyazaki felt was barely concealed.

 “Very well,” the Maker said. “What is your concern then?”

 The woman servant brought a serving tray with a long neck bottle of *sake* upon it, and two drinking glasses made of ornate wood. She set the tray down and began to pour.

 Miyazaki took a breath. “There is a very large stone within… my garden. It has been there for years, and I’ve had to build around it.”

 The Maker looked to the dragonflies.

 “For years, this stone has given me pain,” “Miyazaki continued. “I’ve tried removing it, with the strongest men I could find, but none have been able to take away its bulk. That is when it was suggested to me that I should seek out a gardener. One whose skill is spoken highly of in certain circles. One whose name is dwarfed in reputation to yours, of course, Master of Flowers and Trees. Thus, I am here this day, after a very long journey.”

 “I have many gardeners beneath me,” the Maker rumbled, and banished the servant with a curt flick of his chin.

 “I have need of perhaps three,” Miyazaki said.

 The Maker’s eyes regarded him with a warning. “One of my gardeners is worth ten of any other.”

 *Oh shit.* Miyazaki paled. His throat bobbed and his mouth hung open. The fear he felt for his slight robbed him of his voice. When he found it, he blurted out his apologies and bowed until his nose touched the wood he knelt upon.

 The Maker waited until the silk merchant had finished. “You speak with a brash tongue, man of silk. I am no simple customer here. And you are not in your shop.”

 Another flurry of apologies from the silk merchant, and the Maker allowed them to continue until he grew weary of them. “What do you call this stone?”

 “Takai Mamoru.”

 “And where does it reside?”

 “Kamakura. In a small town near there.”

 The Maker mulled this over. “He is a well known official in the Kamakura Shogunate.”

 Miyazaki’s nose continued to touch the fragrant wood and any moment he believed he would greet the darkness of death. Above him, he heard only birds and cicadas.

 “In my garden there is a bear,” the Maker said. “A particularly skilled bear. I have taught this bear all manner of tricks since it was a cub. I have taught him how to hide not only in the forests, but the cities as well. How to fish, and to hunt. I am reluctant to offer you this bear, as he is worth much. For him, I will require ten times the amount. Agreed?”

 “*Hai*!” wailed Miyazaki, praying for his own life.

 Without a word, the Maker reached for one of the *sake* filled cups. He grunted and gestured for the silk merchant to do the same. Miyazaki quickly complied.

 The Maker lifted the rice liquor in the air. The man before him wasn’t worth it, but it was his custom to seal the transaction with a drink. Another of his minions would discuss further details with this worm, and collect the fee from him. There was no worry that the silk worm would betray the clan or their dealings. Whole lines of families had been erased from time for such folly in the past, and the Maker’s clan remained. He would inform Kuma this day of his newest mission. He would tell his bear that not only was the official to be killed, but so was any other that got in his way, be they man, woman, child, or beast. When the news of the deaths reached the public, both they and this silk merchant would know that the reputation of the Maker’s clan was justified. And to be feared.

 With that thought, the Maker sipped.

**2**

 In another part of the *sugi* forest, in a low building with no walls, the sound of flesh striking stone met the Maker’s ears. He stood at one corner of the building, behind one of six thick columns of *sugi* wood holding up a clay tiled roof. He had removed his sandals and walked barefoot to the training hall, the song of the cicadas masking his approach. He left the silk worm, as he now thought of the merchant, to his servants.

 The Maker thought about Jimmu *Kuma* Kazaka for a moment. He was perhaps the most skilled of all his ninja, second only to the Maker himself. Sending *Kuma––*the Bear––to kill the official would be a task worth much honor to the clan’s name, and coin for its coffers. He inched around the wooden pillar, and saw his minion practicing at a stone brazier. The Maker did not reveal the embers of content he felt warming his breast.

 The Bear thrust his hands into the depths of the wide receptacle, and a clatter of beach rocks could be easily heard. The Maker frowned. His disciple was getting sloppy. He eased out from behind the wood, his hands slipping underneath his robs for a hidden blade. It was time for the master to teach his student something about––

 The Bear spun and hurled a rock at the Maker. The speed of the attack caught the older man by surprise, but the *sensei* still dodged the blow, sinking and rising smoothly, like a hurried sun. He did not draw the knife from beneath his robes. There was no need.

 Recognizing who he had just attacked, the Bear sunk to the *tatami* mats of the training hall, placed his forehead against the straw, and let loose a stream of apologies.

 The Maker stood over his student, allowing him to apologize. There was no wrong in letting him do such. It would keep the younger man humble. The Maker looked to the stones in the brazier. He saw beach rocks, rounded and heavy, and felt approval. The Bear continued to toughen his paws. And his claws.

 “Enough,” the Maker commanded his student, invoking silence.

 The Bear kept his head lowered. “Upon your command, I shall kill myself for what I have just done.”

 The Maker’s face remained expressionless. “That is not my wish.”

 “What is your wish, *Sensei*? May this dog of a servant do your bidding.”

 The Maker stood directly over his student, his toes inches away from the back of the Bear’s head. He had thick hair, shaggy, just like the animal he was named after, but that was where the similarity ended. Jimmu *Kuma* Kazaka was not a big man, and the more the Maker thought about it, he should have had the nickname of *cat* instead.. He was strong as well, deceptively so, and on several occasions the other ninja noted just how strong the Bear *was* in training. Kazaka also possessed the frightening appetite of a bear for blood.

 And the Maker suddenly wanted a demonstration.

 “Stand,” he commanded, and the Bear did so.

 The sensei looked about and saw a set of *hashi* lying across a wooden bowl. He bent at the knees, and picked up the chopsticks.

 The Bear watched him.

 The Maker looked to one end of the training hall, where straw had been fashioned in the shape of a man and stood on two legs of wood.

 “Show me something,” he ordered.

 And tossed both chopsticks at the Bear.

 *Fast*, so incredibly fast, the wooden utensils were plucked out of the air, *one-two*, and fired at the straw man twenty paces away. The first chopstick punctured the straw man’s left eye, or where the eye would have been, imbedding half its length with an audible *whock*! The second missile, a split-second behind the first, took the straw man in the forehead and punched the head from its shoulders.

 The Maker studied the ‘kill’ for a moment. He could ask no better from anyone. He, himself, could do no better.

 “I have a task for you,” the Maker said, hiding the sudden sun-burst of pride he felt for the ninja standing before him.

**3**

 In the early morning light, Kenjo Otake watched the hunched over woodcutter wobble his way up the empty street. The way he was staggering, it was easy for Kenjo to see that the man was drunk. It was too early for such foolishness, the *izakaya* owner thought, but then he realized, if the woodcutter hadn’t actually stopped drinking from the night before, then he was merely continuing with his merriment. Kenjo shook his head. He was young once, and had drunk enough sake in his time, and enjoyed enough women to last him the rest of his days. Now he was married, the father of two children, and owned a popular business. Even better, his food was gaining popularity in the land. Drunken nights were far behind him. Still, a little smile spread across his face as he watched the man sway on his feet and remembered times gone by.

 The woodcutter had appeared a week earlier, dressed in the same poor clothes, and made semi-regular rounds throughout the village, selling the wood he had cut down and split the day before. Kenjo had no opinion of him, but noted how the children would make fun of him, tease him about his smell, and the hump of his back. Kenjo would bark at the children if he saw them do such a thing. He had no patience for such rude behavior, no matter what a man’s station was in life.

 The woodcutter came closer. He was without his cart, and had a glazed look to him. Yes, Kenjo thought, he was drunk out of his skull.

 “Good … morning, sir,” the woodcutter slurred with a bow that almost tipped him over.

 Kenjo stood on the front step to his izakaya, between red paper lanterns that hung just to the left and right of his opened doorway, and nodded. “Good morning. Are you in good health?”

 The woodcutter smiled and displayed well kept teeth. “I am. I am indeed. A beautiful morning.”

 Kenjo looked to the skies. They were overcast with grey lumpy clouds. It wasn’t his idea of a good morning, but since the rainy season was upon them all, any dry morning was one to be appreciated. Then, he thought about where the woodcutter spent his nights, and deduced it was probably out in the forest or the hills somewhere. For him, a dry day, and night, were probably enough to remain drunk about.

 “Are you still drinking?” Kenjo asked politely with a smile.

 “I am finished,” the woodcutter smiled back and produced an empty jug. It was the cheap kind, but still potent. The poor man stepped closer, and the pungent smell of unwashed flesh and alcohol assaulted Kenjo’s senses. The children, it seemed, had reason to tease.

 “I am,” the woodcutter repeated, hunched over. He looked up at Kenjo. “For today I must earn more coin. There’s a storm coming. I can smell it.”

 Kenjo nodded. “I think you’ve supplied the people here with plenty of firewood this season.”

 “People will…” the man paused, and his cheeks puffed out ominously. He caught himself, and for a brief moment, Kenjo feared the woodcutter would vomit right in front of his izakaya. “People will… always need wood.”

 Kenjo released his breath and glanced around. He had no trouble talking with the poor man, but he did not want to be embarrassed by him emptying his stomach right in front of his business, especially a food and drink business.

 “My apologies,” the woodcutter said, “I will… I will not be trouble… to you this morning, kind sir.”

 “That would be most good of you,” Kenjo remarked.

 “I’m afraid to ask however, kind sir, if you… have any need of firewood this day.”

 “Not this day.”

 “Tomorrow then.”

 “Nor tomorrow. No.”

 “I see,” the woodcutter’s swayed on his ankles, and then steadied himself with noticeable effort. “Perhaps I will ask the others then.”

 “You might have better luck,” Kenjo agreed. “But come back next week. I’ll have need of wood then.”

 This brightened the woodcutter’s drunken features. He was not an unhandsome man, Kenjo saw, simply hairy and dirty and born with a hump. He felt a moment’s pity for him.

 “What about the house on the hill?” the woodcutter asked and suppressed a belch.

 “The manor?” Kenjo smiled. “You may ask, but I think Takai-san would have his servants cut his wood for him.”

 “He has servants?” the woodcutter asked in disbelief.

 “He does. Guards too.”

 “Guards?”

 Kenjo nodded.

 “Phah,” the woodcutter said and spittle flew, causing Kenjo to retreat a step. “I’m not afraid of any…gourds.”

 “Guards,” Kenjo corrected him. “And perhaps you should be.”

 The woodcutter grimaced. “I can fight them all right now.”

 “He has perhaps twenty or thirty.”

 “Oh,” the woodcutter said. “That many? Perhaps––” more suppressed gas––“I won’t fight them today.”

 “Very wise of you.”

 “You would not think… think it of me, would you?”

 Kenjo shook his head. He would not.

 “Well, then,” the woodcutter began. “I feel…” a great sigh left him. “I feel sleepy. And hungry. Would you happen to have any… any scraps to eat, kind sir? From last night?”

 Kenjo paused for a moment. He looked about the street. It was still early enough that there was no one else about. “Wait here,” he said and went inside.

 When Kenjo returned, he had a small wooden bucket full of half eaten chicken bones and untouched cooked beef cubes. Food for the dogs, but in this case, it would be breakfast for the man before him. There was some uneaten white rice lumped in there as well. All of it was enough for three meals perhaps. He had nothing against this man, and one act of kindness, on a grey morning on the eve of the rainy season, might bring good fortune to him later on.

 “Here,” Kenjo said as he offered the bucket.

 The woodcutter took it, examined the contents, and grinned. “Thank you, kind sir. I shall bring you wood when I am able.”

 “It is no matter,” Kenjo said, waving his hand.

 “It is… a matter to me,” the woodcutter declared. With that, the man bowed deeply. “I remember such things.”

 “I’m sure you do,” Kenjo said, waving him off.

 The woodcutter smiled and again Kenjo noted how white the man’s teeth were. He may smell like a shithouse, but he had good teeth.

 “I will return, another time,” the woodcutter announced as he walked backwards up the street, bowing in Kenjo’s direction and holding onto the wooden bucket. He stumbled and fell on his backside, yanking a gasp out of Kenjo, but he did not upset the food. Still grinning, the woodcutter got to his feet, popped a half eaten chicken leg into his mouth, and continued walking.

 Kenjo noted that he was headed in the direction of Takai-san’s manor on the hill. He shook his head. He hoped the guards there would leave the poor dog alone. It was no good to make light of those less fortunate, not in his mind. With that last thought, he went about the washing of his izakaya’s front.

 The approaching typhoon brought rain crashing down upon the earth, and powerful winds that leaned on dark fences of trees. The people of the town stayed inside, hoping that the might of the storm would miss them, or if it did hit, it would pass over quickly. They peeked out from behind storm shutters at the darkening sky. Sheets of rain rattled roofs and wooden walkways, pelted walls and drove peasants to whatever shelter lay nearby. As the night moved on and the intensity of the storm grew, there were few that would venture outside in such terrible conditions. Parents put their children to bed, hoping that their sleep would be uninterrupted, and stayed up as long as they could before dozing off.

 Kazaka watched as the roads quickly filled with water, and dark streams began to run. The winds became louder and stronger, and it seemed that the typhoon was going to hit the town. The streets were deserted, and looking up, the only visible light in the night sky belonged to the lanterns of the Takai residence. It was not a castle, perhaps the lord of the manor did not fancy himself important enough to have such defenses, but he did possess a modest number of guardsmen, befitting a well-respected man serving the Kamakura Shogunate. Exactly what Takai did for the Shogunate did not concern Kazaka. The man could be an angel, for all the Bear cared.

 He was still going to die this night.

 For the last two weeks, Kazaka had lived in the hills nearby the town, gathering information on his prey. During the day, the Bear appeared as a hunched over woodcutter, peddling kindling for the townspeople’s fires, speaking in the informal tones of the uneducated. Kazaka had pissed and poured *sake* over his grubby clothes for days, knowing full well people, and especially guards, would have very little to do with him smelling of urine and alcohol. Except the izakaya owner, and for that, the Bear wished good fortune would find the man. The other townspeople, however, berated him, the children mocked him, but they were all fooled by his disguise. He spent a little money on food and drink, using *sake* as medicine to get other town drunks talking. Mamoru Takai, the official Kazaka had to kill, was an honorable man it seemed, and well thought of by the people living below his hill. He helped the poor amongst them. He shared his food and water in hard times, and protected them all from bandits with his small force of soldiers. During the festivals of the summer, he would purchase fireworks and set them off over the nearby river, for all to see. Mamoru Takai seemed a decent and respected soul. It seemed to Kazaka that he rarely had the opportunity to kill someone truly deserving death.

 At night, the Bear would venture forth as a shadow. He watched the town’s guards, always in pairs, walk in a half daze as they completed their rounds. Several times, the guards walked right by Kazaka, and they did not know it. Such guards deserved to die for their carelessness. Twice, he made make his way to the walls of the Takai residence, not to enter but merely to study the defenses. He walked the road leading up to the guarded walls. He tried selling his wood there, dragging a small cart of it behind him. The guards searched him and his cart, and cursed him to be on his way. In truth, Kazaka knew all he needed to know about his target and his soldiers. It was only a question of when to kill the man.

 He waited only a week for the storm to arrive.

 On the evening of the typhoon, under a sky filled with clouds as dark as a dead man’s entrails, Kazaka did away with the woodcutter’s disguise. The storm was just beginning. He gazed out at the falling rain, and breathed in its pureness. He loved the rain, and loved watching it fall. There was nothing more beautiful in this world, nothing more cleansing. Or so he often thought.

 Perched on the side of a hill, overlooking the town but well out of sight from those below, Kazaka sat cross-legged in the ragged little shelter that had been his home for two weeks. He was naked, and breathed deeply of the thick incense he always burned just before he changed into his shadowy form. He prayed for himself, for the honor of his Maker, and for the successful completion of the mission given unto him. Kazaka was not a deeply spiritual man on the surface, but even he admitted that, when one had to kill a person, a little prayer probably wouldn’t hurt. It took less than an hour to prepare himself, spiritually and mentally.

 Then he tended to more earthly affairs.

 He donned his *shinobi shōzoku*, the black garb of a ninja, and his hood and mask. He gathered his tools: a *ninjato*, made from the broken katana of a dead samurai, and coated with the smoke and ash of his fire to help hide the gleam of the short sword’s razor edge. He sheathed the blade in a long scabbard, the tip of which could be removed to access blinding powder if needed. At his waist, nine star-shaped *shuriken* were stowed, along with a *kusari fundo*, a piece of rope ending in weighted balls. On his forearms, three *bo-shurikens* were sheathed, the long iron darts almost the length of a chopstick. He slipped two more of these around each ankle. He hung a blowgun off his back, complete with five poison darts that could drop a man in seconds. A short, thin dagger went between his buttocks.

 Thus armed, Kazaka waited for the storm to intensify.

**4**

 “*Kuso,*” one of the guardsmen swore as the downpour grew stronger, soaking the clothes of both men to the skin. They were at the foot of the road leading up the hill to the home of Takai, standing with spears and sheathed swords. They watched the town, and because of this, Kazaka decided to let them live. There would be two more at the gate above, and the Bear did not want to draw any unnecessary attention to missing men. Not yet anyway. Under drenching darkness, the Bear slipped by them. With the wind screaming and the rain hissing, bypassing the sentries was not a difficult thing. The Bear would kill them without any hesitation if he were detected. The Maker had instructed him to kill as many as he could, and he would do just that once the initial target was dealt with. *Kill as many as you can, even the children,* the Maker had said. While Kazaka did not like the idea of slaying children, he would do just that in his master’s name. But Takai would be the first.

 In almost total blackness, Kazaka moved through the wet undergrowth towards the top of the hill. The rain saturated him to the bone, but he ignored it. Death was visiting the residence of Mamoru Takai on this night of storms, and did not fear nature’s wrath. He drew closer to the outer wall, keeping low and not taking any chances at being detected. Water ran off his masked head and into his eyes. His robes were heavy with rain, and he realized that he would leave a trail once he was inside the house. In the end, he decided it could not be helped.

 There were two guards posted at the gateway, looking like clay statues standing before the storm. Kazaka ignored them. He moved along the wall, staying hidden in the bushes. There was a cleared pathway surrounding the residence, about five paces wide. Kazaka knew it was a defensive measure to prevent someone from doing what he was about to do, but under the ferocity of the typhoon, there were no lanterns lit, and all was in darkness. He wanted to climb the wall further away from the gate. He got moving.

 And paused. Kazaka looked up, on instinct alone, and spotted a glowing light through the trees to his left. It was not bright, but through the waving of the trees he saw it. Guards, he thought at first, but then realized something strange about the illumination.

 It was moving.

 “*Hora*!” a voice said just ahead on the pathway. The Bear froze. There were two sentries, just turning the corner of the wall, shadows against the paleness of the stone. One was gesturing at the light.

 “Look,” the man said again, pointing. The other guard moved forward cautiously to the edge of the pathway, a hand on the hilt of his katana.

 “What is it?” the first man asked.

 “Very strange,” the other said. They stopped a step off the path.

 They were but five paces in front of the unmoving Bear. His hand crept with infinite patience until he gripped the ninjato’s hilt. If the guards spotted him, he would rush and kill them both. He slowly lowered himself further into the bushes.

 “It’s moving this way!” one of the men exclaimed over the roar of the typhoon.

 The Bear stayed low to the earth. He felt warm rain against his back. More dripped into his eyes and he blinked it away, not daring to move even under the cover of the brush.

 “It’s a devil,” a voice said, but his voice sounded different, as if succumbing to sleep.

 “A… devil…” Kazaka heard the other say.

 Through the wet undergrowth, the Bear looked up and saw both men standing, illuminated as if by dull moonlight. He could not see their features, but there was something wrong in their stance. They were too relaxed.

 Then, the light reached Kazaka, and he again became as still as stone. Over the roar of the typhoon, a new sound perked his ears, like the singing of a single cicada, except perhaps not as harsh. The light grew about him, and the Bear knew he had been discovered. *Unfortunate*, was his only thought. He would make them pay.

 Kazaka looked up, his hand on the hilt of his blade, the strange sound louder in his ears.

 The light dropped down directly before his eyes.

 And he knew no more.

**5**

From where he stood in the shadows, the Aush watched as steam and disinfectants sprayed three bodies as they were manipulated through the air on legless platforms. Their limbs were splayed out, and held in place by invisible barriers of a construct from another place in the cosmos. Their bodies, chemically treated to prevent organ deterioration and muscular atrophy, as well as to ward off desiccation, had been kept in stasis for centuries. Alive, and in a state of unending torpor; without dreams, in theory, although it had already been proven on previous expeditions that flushing and completely erasing the primitive memories of the bipeds was difficult to accomplish. Through transparent tubes the bodies floated, one following the other, still wearing their primitive garments and bits of metal protection. Past checkpoints of computer banks they flowed, as lights twinkled, readings were taken, and analysis conducted. Otherworld magnetic resonance images were recorded, providing imagery as precise as autopsies, storing the results in databanks. They were paused at one station, and, in midair, each was slowly, as if in a dream, rolled over onto its back. Thin biomechanical cords, ending in a sea urchin’s array of formidable looking needles, were poised over each specimen’s body at regular intervals. On cue, they punctured both cloth and flesh to deliver chemicals and compounds necessary for tissue revival, and to suck out spent gel-based desiccants. The parietal sections of their craniums were drilled into and fluids injected. Each specimen displayed no feeling of the invasive procedures. Occasionally blood would appear from damaged tissue, but only for the second it took for an octopus-like instrument to appear and cauterize the tear or puncture.

 Each man slept.

 They were guided into a laboratory of shadows and star-pricks of lights. In a row, they were halted and their platforms inclined to almost upright position. The lead specimen was closest to an array of otherworld surgical devices on a seemingly fixed metal table. Phantoms moved around them, passing through light at irregular intervals, and giving only glimpses of their physical shape. Checks on equipment to be used were performed, and the air filled with the smell of preservatives. It would soon be filled with more.

 The Aush continued watching as a smaller figure, an Aqjm, crossed his field of vision. A long willowy arm, with flesh the color of snow, reached out towards a bank of instruments. Spidery fingers fanned over a small control interface. A green display formed in the air, bearing alien characters and numerals. The scientist’s thoughts activated tabs, and leafed through lists of readings taken from the once dormant organisms. Huge compound eyes, almond shaped and black, took in the three bodies coming from the remaining circuit checkpoints. A lipless mouth, a gash really, arched upwards in a satisfied smile. It was naked, as were most of its kind, having long forsaken decorations for their outwardly asexual frames. When working on alien species, however, the scientists––in this case the *anatomists––*chose to wear a non-staining, bio-degradable material that coated and shielded them from any possible unsavory humanoid fluids. A small metal instrument, much like a fork missing the inner tines, was picked up and activated. A green beam snapped to life between the two prongs, and the anatomist moved to the first subject. With a thought, biomechanical arms dropped from the inky heights of the ceiling, and began peeling away the specimen’s outer garments.

 All the while, the Aush, a larger, more physical, version of the anatomist watched from the shadows. Where the Aqjm scientist was smaller and more frail looking, the Aush was larger, his musculature, albeit sinewy, heavier. Where the other travelers walked about without clothing, his strain actually wore protective plates composed of emerald green lightweight material, essential in stopping various energy and plasma weapons. A dark visor covered his compound eyes, giving his already authoritative demeanor a charge of menace. He was not a creature of science. He was an orchestrator of war.

 He did not care about two of the subjects taken out of stasis, but the third one, the one in black, intrigued him. He had existed in the cosmos for centuries, and had made several trips to this particular world, protecting his brothers and sisters as they pursued research and objectives of little interest to him. They had traveled together for too long, it seemed to him, and they carried themselves with a growing air of self worth, much more than they actually were. What was worse, they had little time for the Aush, beyond protection. They were not the ones who would conquer the worlds in this particular solar system. They were the ones who would sample and study and ultimately catalogue whatever life remained after the invasion.

 And yet, they looked *down* on him.

 Little did they know he conducted his own studies. He made note of the warrior castes of the worlds he visited. He examined their primitive weapons and armor. He had already examined the man in black’s curious assortment of edged and throwing weapons, laid out on a carefully sterilized platform. The *sword*, which he knew the name of, was shorter than a regular *katana,* yet the scabbard was for a much longer blade. He assumed it was for a reason, but could not deduce what. Primitive weapons of the planet were of great interest to him, only outdone by the manner in which these *men* used them.

 And this man in black piqued his curiosity.

 –*What are you looking at?* one of the anatomists mentally projected with the feeling that he didn’t expect to understand the warrior’s reply.

 –*That one.* the Aush projected back.

 –*What about him?*

 –*He interests me. Might I have him?*

The anatomist, the leader of his particular team, frowned. –*What for? So that you may perhaps remove his skin simply to gauge how long the subject would take to expire?* *This is a study of* [*anatomy*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_anatomy)*,* [*physiology*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Physiology) *and* [*biochemistry*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biochemistry)*. Not… playthings.*

 The Aush’s mouth was a tight line. He did not appreciate the emotional discharge surging from the little anatomist’s mental projection. Other scientists flocked around the projector, almost identical in appearance, lending their support. Though his face did not reveal it, the loathing the Aush felt for his fellow travelers rose to dangerous levels.

 ­–*I’m not even exactly certain why their weapons or how they use them is of any interest to you, anyway,* projected the anatomist. His compound eyes locked gazes with the black visor of the Aush. –*Yes, we know of your little study sessions, and we find it amusing that the soldier wishes to play the intellectual. You didn’t think we knew? Predictable. Your sort is only suitable for one thing, and that one thing is never an issue during research expeditions. In fact, once we exit this galaxy and return to our own, I shall forward the motion to bar all military* Kajst *from further projects. Your presence simply is not necessary. Really. Does a full grown biped need protection from… ants?*

 The Aush contained himself.

 –*Thoughts?* The anatomist prodded the challenge, allowing a discharge of abhorrence to escape.

 The Kajst Aush kept his thoughts to himself.

 –*Nothing?* the little Aqjm needled again.

 –*I think*, the Aush projected carefully, –*that for ones so intellectually gifted as yourselves, you can be, at times, quite… obtuse.*

The offence rippled through all the researchers. The tension rose and was palpable.

 –*Leave us,* the Lead Anatomist commanded. –*If we have need of any squashing, you can be certain we’ll summon you and your warriors,* mighty *Aush.*

The Kajst Aush did not leave immediately, knowing full well that pausing for effect would needle these arrogant little Aqjm. Before the head scientist could project further argument on the matter, the Aush walked towards the table of archaic weapons. He studied them for a moment, before deciding on a sword and scabbard belonging to one of the *hu-*mans. The Aush took the sword without any projection, and left the research lab. As he exited, two other green armored Kajst--his personal soldiers and all of what was assigned to the expedition--fell into step behind.

 The three Annihilator Kajsts made their way to the command bridge, two levels up.

 Projecting a very unflattering expletive in the direction of the departed Kajst, the Lead Anatomist focused his energies on the task before him. As soon as the Annihilators were gone, the researchers went about their studies. –*Preparations are complete*, one of them projected with a discharge of excitement. The Lead motioned for the individual to step back. Excitement was not something to open up a specimen with. A steady appendage was required.

 The Lead Anatomist motioned to the other, who dutifully handed over the surgical beam, the green band of light snapping with energy as he did so.

 –*Pay attention, all of you,* the Lead commanded. –*These subjects were placed in stasis specifically to test the elasticity and durability of their vital organs, musculature, and… skin, over hundreds of cycles. I will now proceed with the surface scouring. Pay attention, and have the servos at the ready. These* men *contain a surprising amount of fluid which, for the validity of this procedure, has been thawed. It goes everywhere once they are opened.*

Adjusting his surgical device, the green laser extended outwards and widened. The beam crackled once more, became stable, and finally turned blue. Holding it between long white fingers, the Lead Anatomist placed one hand against the bare chest of the still unconscious Japanese guardsman. With a practiced skill, the Aqjm brought the blue beam parallel with the man’s flesh.

 He then made his first incision.

 **6**

 The screaming woke the Bear.

 He discovered he could not move his head, nor any of his limbs. From the corner of his eye, he could see figures standing about an upright man. At least, he believed it to be a man. Kazaka could not see his lower body, but he could see his outstretched arms. The shadows to his right moved again, rippling with motion. There were many of them. There was light…

 Jimmu *Kuma* Kazaka finally knew terror.

 A guardsman, one of the pair Kazaka had watched, was being worked upon by a multitude of short, white devils with bulbous heads. Though he could not see clearly, he could hear the man’s tortured howls as they administered tools on his flesh. Kazaka saw white limbs rise and fall on the guardsman’s person. Blood geysered in a black sheet, and he caught whiff of it, coppery and strong. Another shriek from the man, riding out the very last gush of wind in his lungs. He heard the curt intake of breath again, and another howl scorched the shadows. *What were they doing to him? The devils! No warrior deserved to be held and tortured in such a manner!*

 *“Nandaro!”* Kazaka roared.

 *“Kuso!”* swore the other guardsman, also to his right.

 “Eh!” Kazaka yelled. “You’re alive?”

 “Hai! Who are you?” the guardsman demanded.

 But Kazaka didn’t have time to answer, for as soon as he cried out, a multitude of heads looked in his direction. He could see them in his peripheral vision, just out of focus. Then one detached itself from the masses and rushed the Bear where he hung in place. Like a quick moving spider, the creature came up close to him, and he felt his stomach turn to ice. The thing had eyes like those of a fly, yet they were shaped like oversized eggs. The face came in close to his chest, lipless mouth parted, silent, ready to bite. Kazaka breathed deeply, struggling to control his terror and his trembling chest. The other guardsman kept his tongue, terrified that he would attract the devil’s attention.

 The creature stared and stared at Kazaka, for what seemed a very long time.

 The screams from the third guardsman began to die away.

 There was movement to the right, and the group of devils stepped back in a single tide as the platform holding the screaming man upright lowered itself to their height. They then crowded in.

 The white devil before Kazaka turned its head towards the examination platform, and for a moment, the Bear knew that this one was more interested in what was happening over there. It looked back to the trapped ninja once again, before flitting away to join its brethren at the edge of Kazaka’s vision.

 “Oh no,” moaned the other guardsman. “Oh Lords of Heaven and Earth, no…”

 Kazaka heard the noise. He’d heard it many times before on the fisherman’s wharf, where men removed the guts and ripped the spines from their catch.

 The guardsman screamed once again, a short yelp punctuated by a series of grunts and moans. The smell of shit sprayed the air, and still the man grunted in the most pitiful manner. Then, the sounds of cracking bones. Another grunt of pain, weaker still. More sounds, wet and organic, of tissue being sliced and stretched.

 Kazaka glimpsed one of the blood spattered devils, his arms dark up past his elbows, stepping away from the table, and stretching out something very long and rubbery from the guardsman’s body. More grunts of agony from the victim. The man was, unfortunately, very strong.

 “Oh Lords of Heaven and Earth…” the other guardsman moaned. None of the white devils paid him any heed, they were so enraptured with what was happening on the platform. “They are… they are *peeling* him like an apple.”

 “What can you see?” Kazaka demanded.

 “Oh Lords… Oh Lords…”

 “*What?”*

As if not possessing the breath any longer, the barest grunts could be heard from the guardsman on the table.

 “Oh Lords…” the other man moaned.

 “Can you move?” Kazaka whispered harshly.

 “We are in hell…” came the wail.

 *“Can you move?”*

 “We…” the guardsman stated as if in a nightmare. “We are in *hell*.”

 Kazaka gave up speaking to the man. His mind was gone.

 He listened to the devils’ work. Sometimes he heard them, in his head, say something that was not quite words, but a long and deep note, not unlike the song of the cicadas. But he did not know what it meant.

 The guardsman on the table became quiet after long moments. The white devils continued working on the corpse. Wet sounds, splashing at times, dripping at others, made Kazaka cringe. He tested his limbs again. They were impossible to move and yet, he could see nothing holding him. *Magic*, he thought. The blackest magic had seized him.

 “Lords of Heaven and Earth, Lords of Heaven and Earth––” said the remaining guardsman.

 Kazaka’s eyes flicked to the right again.

 Like an embankment of evil, the white devils surrounded the guardsman. Their arms ended in things that glowed blue in the shadows.

 “LORDS OF HEAVAGGGHHH!” came the shriek. The guardsman had learned plenty from his companion. He screamed and screamed, and screamed again. He kept right on screaming even as he was lowered in amongst that mass of white heads and long arms.

 Then, much to Kazaka’s fright and dismay, the man *truly* began to sing.

**7**

From the command bridge, the Aush watched the last few moments of the evisceration and then segmentation of the first specimen on a circular monitor. He directed the bio-eye past the bloody mess on the platform, moving it over the frenzied work being conducted on the second specimen, whose screams were so loud, the Aush mentally switched off the bio-eye’s audio. The meat could be noisy at times, and the Aush wondered why the Aqjm had not sedated their experiments to begin with. Probably some secondary purpose that only the scientists knew of.

 The Aush straightened and fumed.

 His flanking Kajst, the only two on this particular mission, knew their commander’s body language when they saw it. The Kajst was pissed.

 The commanding Kajst steered the bio-eye towards the man in black. He was next to experience the unmedicated administrations of the Aqjm. Helpless evisceration. The Aush scoffed again. And the Aqjm called *him* barbaric. Not them however. Their studies were much too important to be called anything but valuable. This was not his mission. He was not a protector, he was an Annihilator. He did not like being talked down to by an arrogant Aqjm. To think that the Aqjm believed he and his two Kajsts were not needed on such a mission. *Any* expedition that involved the Aqjm needed protection. They were naïve in everything beyond their bagging and tagging and segmenting. If the Kajst didn’t accompany the pompous intellectuals, anything could happen to them. *Any manner of accident*. And then the Kajst would have to *correct* things.

 He thought long and hard then, even as the bio-eye drifted to the left of the man in black, and revealed the extent of the operation being performed on the second specimen. They had already cut into the abdominal cavity and were delighting in exploring the internal organs. They were like newly born young. The Aqjm were perhaps the most annoying of the four sexes. These *hu*-mans had only two, typical of a species ranked low on the evolutionary grade, and so boring in more pleasurable matters of the flesh. The Aqjm routinely banished the Aush from the science bay during their work and denied him any and all access to their records. It all infuriated him.

 But now, he saw an opportunity.

 *Any manner of accident… could happen.* He thought.

 The Aush took control of the bio-eye once more and veered to the platform where the man in black’s weapons were, those oddly interesting weapons that he had not once seen in all of his missions to this particular planet. He had observed whole armies of *hu*-mans clash in the past. He had studied their battle tactics and strategies, which were interesting and often entertaining in a two dimensional way. He watched them from the use of stones and clubs, to the *sword*, to the more recent invention of the projectile *gun* and *missile*. But not these weapons. Not these. Some of these weapons, like the knife extracted from the creature’s buttocks, reeked of secrecy, of infiltration.

 The Aush made his decision right then. The two green armored Kajst behind him would support any story he later concocted, their loyalty to him was never in question. And it had been a long time since he had seen any activity of a more interesting sort.

 The Aqjm were still playing with the second man’s innards.

 The Aush felt a rush of excitement as he positioned the bio-eye higher up in the shadows, where it could observe events unnoticed. What was it the *Ro-*mans would declare at the beginning of their captive gladiatorial tournaments? The Aush remembered.

 *Let the games begin.*

 With as close to a smile the Kajst were capable of, the Aush faced a control panel, located the science bay, thought-touched the necessary coded sequence, and powered down the invisible shackles of the man in black.

**8**

 Sounds Kazaka knew would haunt him for the remainder of his days filled the starlit chamber. Again he tested his bonds. He tried to see what held him, but as far as he could determine, *nothing* restrained him. No ropes or chains bound his arms. *Sorcery*! His jaw clenched at the unfairness of it all. He was in hell, and he would be feasted upon next by the mass of maggot-white ghouls gathered at the edge of his vision. More sounds of tissue being cut, of bone being sawed, and the stench of disembowelment. The guardsman still moaned, much to the horror of the Bear. Kazaka felt a twinge of deep pity for the man, it was not the way a warrior should die. It was not the way *he* should die.

 Baring his teeth and arching his back, the Bear heaved against his invisible bonds for seconds… then collapsed.

 *You must never surrender,* the Maker’s voice reached him*. You must never surrender, even if defeat is certain. A ninja is to the night what the sun is to the sky. Take your own life before admitting defeat, and in the next, your powers will be even greater. But you must do* everything *before that.*

 Kazaka drew breath once more and again pushed against his invisible shackles. His eyes focused on his right fist, willing it to break free of whatever had chained it. He pushed until his limbs ached and his mind began to scream on its own.

 And still he remained frozen.

 *Lords of Heaven*–he began and stopped. Beyond his right fist, one of the devils stepped away, a dark ribbon of gut held high in unholy celebration. The guardsman was quiet now.

 *Everything*. He must do everything. Kazaka’s mind raced. He did not have much time. His eyes went to the dark ceiling and saw nothing that could help him. He could not even move his head, how could he do anything in such a trap? Rage began to build within his chest, fueled generously by the fear of the monsters nearby; for when they finally finished with the guardsman, it would be the Bear’s turn to be embraced by those long, white arms. Sweat moistened his mask and *shinobi shōzoku*. It could not end like this. It *must* not end like this. There had to be a way!

 Then he was falling.

 The freefall caught Kazaka by surprise only for a moment, then his training and reflexes took over. He landed on the balls of his feet, and rolled over, coming up on one knee with his hands hooked and ready before him. The abrupt freedom was savored only for a split second. He needed to arm himself.

 The Lords were obviously smiling: the table of weapons was in plain sight before him.

**9**

 One of the white devils turned at the noise. The creature’s head snapped up when it saw that the last subject was gone. Almost immediately, the others directed their attention to the empty platform. Lipless mouths dropped open in confusion. Compound eyes searched the chamber for the missing biped. Several of the Aqjm saw the man in black at the same time. Some of them gestured with arms that were red with blood.

 The Bear stepped away from the table to face them, crouching.

 Sounds began to fill his head; the sounds of angry cicadas. The devils faced him, their mouths open as if to scream. One of the creatures moved towards the freed man.

 And Kazaka unleashed his shurikens.

**10**

 The angle of the bio-eye caught just enough light to see stars rip into their targets. The first Aqjm died with one embedded in its oversized eye. The others charged the *hu*-man in a desperate attempt to seize him. There were perhaps seven or nine of them.

 The bio-eye caught it all and the Aush rushed to activate the audio.

 Faster than he could process the scene, the *hu*-man’s arm rose and fell. Stars flew from his hand and cut into the advancing mass of Aqjm. The scientists fell bleeding, their black life-fluid spilling from their bodies in alarming arterial sprays. One Aqjm staggered to his knees when a silver star cut into his unprotected chest, shredding the delicate organ matter within. Another’s head snapped back, a star buried in its forehead. Another whirled about when a weapon half-severed its thin arm at the shoulder, and fell flat when a second stabbed him deep at the back of his thin skull. One Aqjm slipped away from the stalled mass, and tried to flank the *hu*-man.

 But the man in black saw him.

 Two stars killed the Aqjm. The first one shattered his cheek, the second gashed open his neck.

 The man dropped back. A blast of smoke appeared in the center of the room amongst the survivors.

 The living Aqjm hesitated. It was perhaps the only time they might have had to escape, for the *hu*-man attacked them a second later. Through the haze, the tail of a silver comet cut the head from one of the scientists, its neck bursting life-fluid in an inky gout. Another had its arm hacked off.

 The Aush noted, with a master’s approval of a weapon well used, that the *hu*-man was using its sword to great effect.

 Screams burst through the audio of the bio-eye. When was the last time the Aush heard an Aqjm actually *use* its vocal chords? He suppressed a dark chuckle.

 One Aqjm fled the massacre, and the Aush guessed who it was. The bio-eye recorded the Lead Anatomist fleeing the chamber, and sealing it behind him. The *hu*-man paid this no mind. It was too busy killing.

 Then the Aush watched the man as he retrieved his throwing stars. There was still much to see.

 With a silent command, the Kajst Aush accessed the examination chamber’s door and re-opened it. He commanded his two Kajst inside the bridge. A second after that, he sealed the blast doors leading to the compartment, initiating and following starcraft protocol in the eventuality of a bio-threat, contamination, or decompression. Bright symbols reflected in the black visor of the Aush while he turned his attention to the still fleeing Lead Anatomist. The Kajst activated more bio-eyes, and switched to split-visuals so he could simultaneously monitor the *hu*-man’s activity.

 *Now*, he thought to the Lead Anatomist, *let us see if you have need of… squashing.*

**11**

 The door opened with a hiss. Kazaka froze, his hand filled with the guardsman’s longer katana. He listened, hearing only the weak groan of one of the nearby devils, one of the few that hadn’t died immediately from the shurikens. The Bear waited, and realized that no attackers were coming. He moved, catlike, through the smoke and gloom and located the creature. It had been disemboweled with one slash from the sword. Those large black eyes regarded the ninja, blinked, and the devil resignedly rolled its head to one side.

 The Bear lopped its head off with one chop.

 Kicking the head away, Kazaka decided that the creatures were frail things. He did not believe them to be gods. Gods would not have their heads taken by mere mortals. Devils, possibly. In any case, he was pleased that they had died. He glanced at the two tables where the guardsman lay. Both men had been savaged in such ways not even the ninja knew were possible. It was one thing to kill, but to take the men apart a piece at a time, while they still lived, filled the Bear with loathing. There was no honor here. There was only a curiosity about death.

 Kazaka flicked the gore from his length of steel. It was a good sword. Well kept, and very sharp. He looked about the dark room, noting how the lights above were like stars. Perhaps they were. He knew he was in a place of black magic, and that he would have to use all his skill to escape. The devils had their chance to kill him, but they were too slow, too complacent in thinking he was helpless. Woe upon them. The Bear was free. Worse, he had his weapons, and was very much inclined to use them. He gathered up his ninjato and blowgun. Kazaka wanted to be away from this place, and moved without a sound towards the open door. He kept to the shadows, and peered out. The corridor beyond was poorly lit and empty.

 Kazaka eased into the corridor, sword poised to kill.

**12**

*Boom boom boom* the sounds reverberated as the Lead Anatomist slammed his fist against the metal doors of the sealed bridge. Several members of the science research team stood behind him with their compound eyes wide and staring. Some looked back in the direction of the gravity wells, one on opposite sides of the starcraft, which connected all four levels of the craft. Some wondered where the rest of the team were. Others expected the black garbed monster to appear around a corner and attack them at any moment.

 –*Open this door at once!* projected the Lead Anatomist. –*We’ve been breached by a hostile organism!*

But the doors did not open.

 –*Why won’t they acknowledge?* One of the Aqjm asked. –*Are they not receiving you?*

 –*Silence!* commanded the Lead. He had no time to spare on mere botanists.

 –*But why won’t they open?* persisted another.

 –*What’s happened below*? demanded a small pedologist, maintaining his dignity.

 –*A specimen escaped,* replied a geophysicist. Others, drawn to the ruckus, gathered about the door.

 *–There were deaths,* said one.

 *–No!* came a collective gasp.

 –*Open this door at once!* the Lead Anatomist projected over them all, silencing them. *–I know you are in there!*

In the surface of the metal, a dot of light appeared. The dot expanded into a screen filled with the dour expression of the Kajst Aush. His black visor rippled as the image stabilized itself.

 –*Aush! Open this door at once.*

But the Aush did not reply. Instead, his visor filled the view screen as he drew closer, studying the gathered scientists outside of the bridge.

 –*I see there are still a few of you left*, the Aush noted. –*Excellent.*

 *–Why are you doing this?* the Lead demanded. –*Explain yourself!*

 *–I think,* the projection came slowly, –*that you are better using your time arming yourselves. There is a hostile organism on board... and it is proving itself extremely capable at killing.*

 The Lead Anatomist paused in his fury. How did the Kajst know the organism was effective in killing? And how did the specimen free itself in the first place? In his panic, these were questions that he had not considered. Until now.

 –*You released it! You purposely freed it! Only you could have done such a thing! Are you completely unstable?*

The shock of the accusation silenced the remaining scientists. Here and there, compound eyes stared at the combat specialist’s image.

 The light screen flickered. –*It’s coming*, the Aush projected, and severed communications.

**13**

 The Bear exited the laboratory and made his way down a metal corridor ringed with dull lighting. It was dark, and utterly perfect conditions for the ninja. He moved along, his *tabi* footwear making not a sound. The metal was warm to the touch and there was so *much* of it. What manner of Maker could construct such a castle? It must have taken years.

 Just ahead was a doorway. Kazaka hugged the edge and slowly peeked around it. It was empty of the white devils. He did not recognize the laboratory for what it was. He did not understand the computer banks, the specimen tubes, or the machines pulsing with eerie internal lights, as if lightning was trapped within. He saw naked bodies of men and women, in various stages of experiments, too horrific for him to comprehend. Dead. All dead. There were heads missing their eyes, torsos without limbs but with long tubes, like those of leeches, attached to where limbs should be. There was a head on a black box just beyond the doorway. It was the head of a man whose flesh was dark. Kazaka had never seen the like before.

 The head’s eyes opened. It groaned and spoke to him.

 The Bear almost screamed. The head talked in a tongue he did not understand. He backed away. It was too horrible. Fright exploded in his chest and lower legs, and Kazaka stepped back out of the doorway and placed his back against the bulkhead. The head continued to cry out. Its cries became a moan.

Breathing deeply, Kazaka ran past the opening, towards the end of the corridor, where there was a shallow cave made of metal. A low hum reached the Bear’s ears. He edged towards the opening, trying to ignore the head still shouting madness. He cocked his head to look, and saw that it went up and down in inky darkness, illuminated by tiny stars. But there were no stairs. Kazaka stepped into the cave, thinking to climb his way up. The walls of the cave were not smooth, but knobbed. Climbing would be easy.

 His feet left the ground.

 The Bear shrieked in spite of himself. Upwards he flew, far too quickly for his liking, swimming in the air until he came to the opening of the next level. He grabbed the edges of the portal and pulled himself in. He almost collapsed with relief and pushed himself against the nearest wall. He took a moment to compose himself and take in his surroundings.

 There was a wall before him, as well as a long corridor ahead and to his right. Also to his right was a dark wall full of holes coated in what looked to be clear ice. Kazaka brought his sword to guard and made his way to the wall without a sound, staying within the gloom of the halls. He came to the first panel of ice and peered in. It was a living quarters of some kind, that much he knew, dully lit in pink and purple with devices and shapes unknown to him. Strange pictures adorned not only the walls, but the ceiling as well. He could see nothing comfortable about the domicile, but it reeked of foulness. As he peered in, his head bumped the ice. The Bear jerked back. It was warm to the touch. He tapped it with the hilt of his blade, testing its strength before placing a hand on its surface. *Warmth*. Kazaka’s eyes opened wide behind his black mask. He touched the surface again, marveling at the smoothness of it.

 Drawing back, the Bear took in the rest of the wall. There were several of these strange quarters, if they were indeed the devils’ dwellings. Did the devils sleep? Would they sleep if he hid until night? He thought about it. Was there even a day or night in hell? He decided not.

 He stepped along the wall, passing the other domiciles, until he came to a new passageway hidden by shadows. He glanced down the new corridor and saw nothing. Darkness ruled here, that much was obvious to him. Ninja bathed in shadow, and were silence manifested in flesh. There were many things unknown to Kazaka, but he was not a stupid man. The white devils lived in strange places. They ripped people apart and left speaking heads, but what was important above all else, was they bled and died easily enough.

 The Bear glanced around. There were plenty of places to hide. The ceiling was low and bulging with thick black ropes.

 Hell. He was in hell.

 Underneath his mask, a grim smile spread.

 But it was a *ninja’s* hell.

 The Lead Botanist stood before a bank of computer poles and studied the numerals and characters floating in the air before her. With a thought, she brought up another series of images, and studied them with great interest. There was a problem with the depth of the soil in the chamber, and the root systems of the towering *sugi* trees could go no further in the space that was afforded them. The Lead glanced up, taking in the towering heights of the trees, their foliage blocking out the starlight. She wasn’t quite certain what to do with the situation. The growing trees were an experiment spanning centuries, and they were brought aboard the starcraft when they were mere saplings. No one knew that the plant-life would flourish so well in space. It was an Earth forest in the heavens, and many had doubted her team’s ability to make it thrive. But thrive it had, to this point, where it could grow no further. It just went to prove what the Lead Botanist and her team of dedicated scientists were capable of.

 She studied the dark height of the trees and breathed in the gift of the purest oxygen she had ever tasted. It was wonderful, the rush more satisfying than any of the stimulants found on their world. A few more years perhaps, and they would transplant these magnificent giants to their homeworld, and begin the phase of introducing new flora into their environment. The Lead Botanist looked down, and took in the vast domed chamber about her. She took a step away from the floating images of data and the problems they presented, and walked to the edge of the platform she stood upon. Here, from the observatory in the center of the dome, meters above a nutrient-rich earth floor covered in humus, she gazed at her creation. The dome was filled with thick foliage not only from the trees, but the vegetation allowed to grow and flourish underneath it like a thick, breathing blanket. Here and there, she spied her team members moving through the forest, conducting their research and recording their findings. The plant life rose up to their waists in some places, giving the illusion of the Aqjms wading through a deluge of woodland green.

 She kept on watching and gradually became aware of a tapping coming from the entranceway to the dome, the only entry and exit portal in the entire chamber. It persisted for a short time, an irregular metallic sound, and then stopped, only to resume again. Curiosity, an Aqjm’s greatest weakness, prodded her to project a command to an Aqjm closest to the portal.

 –*Investigate the source of that*, she instructed.

 And a tall, white botanist, as willowy as the bushes surrounding it, moved towards the source of the sound.

 Hidden amongst the mess of strange ropes in the ceiling, Kazaka watched as the white devil stepped through the circular doorway. The creature was a tall, frail looking thing with an oversized head. It was a good thing he took into consideration the size of their heads, for he could not make a noose big enough to fit one. He waited until the devil took another step, further away from the portal and into the shadows of the corridor. It was no doubt looking for the source of the noise. Without a sound, the Bear shifted and tensed his legs where he had hooked them through the ceiling ropes, and lowered his upper body, upside-down, just above and behind the white devil’s bulbous head. Holding his breath, he tossed the length of rope, his *kusari fundo*, over his target’s neck and yanked with all his strength. The devil half turned when it was jerked off its feet, upwards into the air. There was short, audible snap of bone breaking, a brief dance, and then nothing. Dead, as easy as that. Kazaka snarled behind his face mask as he held the creature up for moments longer. Then he crunched his abdomen, curling himself back up into the shadows of the ceiling, and like a predator of the night, hauled the carcass of his prey up with him.

 The Bear stowed the body away and then dropped to the metallic floor with barely a sound. He eased himself to the edge of the portal, peered in, and his mouth dropped open. It was a forest, a grand timberland almost as beautiful as that of the Maker’s. Kazaka wondered how such a grand woodland could exist in hell? He decided it did not matter. He could see the devils moving through the shadows of the forest, as white as maggots on dead meat. The light was strange in this place, twilight or such, as if the sun had just sunk below a range of mountains and darkness had not yet claimed the land.

 As a breath of wind parting willows, Kazaka slipped into the forest in Hell. He dropped into a crouch, and moved in a zigzag pattern, pressing forward. The Bear held the guardsman’s katana flat against his back, like a scorpion ready to strike. He moved as a fish would through water, barely disturbing the vegetation surrounding him. Shadows were the cauls of death, and friend to the ninja. It was not long before he came upon his next two victims.

 The pedologist straightened and felt unease, though he did not know why. He glanced about the trunks of the mighty trees and finally looked up. There was something wrong, and he could sense it. He could discern a terrible concentration in the air, a menace, just barely noticeable, but present. It grew closer, and when the soil scientist paused to better understand exactly what it was, he could sense it hesitate. His compound eyes took in the form of his companion, not far away and stooping amongst the underbrush, no doubt studying some species of flora.

 The pedologist stood in confusion, thinking of how to proceed, when something zipped through the air and sunk into the hollow of his cheek. His long fingers came up in reflex, touching the thing embedded in his flesh. A burning sensation spread outwards, lighting up his senses, and he realized with horror that a foreign and toxic compound of some sort had invaded his body. He tried turning to his companion and project a warning, but then he was falling, and the ground swallowed him whole.

 The other pedologist nearby heard the sound of something crashing and turned to see his fellow soil sampler gone. He projected a question, and received no reply. Puzzled, he stepped forward to the location where the scientist once stood, the underbrush crunching beneath his white feet. He projected again and thought, for a moment, he received the barest flicker of pain. Then something entangled his legs and he was falling. He blurted out a thought of surprise just as the humus covered ground raced up to his face. He landed on his hands and elbows, face down.

 There was a solid connection to the back of his neck. His vision bounced, went awry, and for the briefest of moments, before everything went eternally black, he saw his white torso, headless, spraying streams of black life fluid.

 The Lead Botanist turned in the direction of the shocked mental outburst coming from her left. She went to the edge of the platform and called out with her mind. All but three of her science team reported back, and she could sense their collective consciousness converging on the point where the distress thought rang out.

 ––*Is something wrong?* one of the team asked her, but she did not answer. Instead she gave the command to proceed to the area where they heard the cry originate.

 *––With caution*, she informed them all with a wary afterthought.

 Kazaka pressed his dark form up against a tree, and watched three of the white devils coming through the brush towards him. As they came forward, he slunk further back, around the massive trunk, easing out of their sight. When they had gone by, he waited for a moment before bringing up his blowgun. He had four darts remaining, all coated with the Maker’s poison. Kazaka noted that a previous victim taken down with the dart had an interesting reaction to the poison. It ate away at their flesh as it rendered them senseless. Fortunate for the Bear.

 He loaded the gun and brought it to his lips. Two darts stuck out from between his fingers, ready to be loaded. Three targets. He would not have much time, but then he realized, neither would his prey. With that thought, he huffed into the blowgun.

 *––There’s some––*was the final thought the Lead Botanist received from an Aqjm in what was now thought of as the danger zone. It was weak, dying, and filled with a sensation of burning. Then silence.

 She would take no further chances, and ordered all remaining Aqjm to stay away from the dangerous area in the forest. She then quickly stepped to a communication stalk, the tall reed-like device was almost indistinguishable from the computer poles except for its triangular head. With a thought-tap, she called security.

 There was no response.

 Puzzlement filled the Lead’s face and before she could do anything more, a scream of pain erupted from the forest behind her. She whipped about, scanning the undergrowth for signs of anything wrong. Here and there, she saw her fellow scientists, standing in the vegetation waist deep and looking in her direction, where she stood on the central platform. They were all frozen to the spot, uncertain as to how to proceed.

 Then she sensed it, as clear as the oxygen she breathed. Fear rose in the thoughts of her companions. It riveted them to their places. She projected a thought of comfort while simultaneously hailing security once again.

 ––*Aush?* She called out once more with her mind. *––Kajst?*

Silence.

 Then another outburst of pain.

 The Lead Botanist whirled about, just in time to see a single Aqjm amongst the trees disappearing from sight, yanked into the underbrush by something below. There was a quick, high-pitched squeal in the Lead’s mind, then a stillness that made her lower extremities quiver with fear. Something was out there killing Aqjm. She darted back to the communication stalk and once more hailed the Aush and his Kajst. Again nothing. Behind her, the few remaining Aqjm fled through the forest, their frantic cries for help scrambling her thought patterns. She forced them out, and again called for the Aush.

 She looked over her shoulder and caught a glimpse of something black floating through the shadows of the upper regions of the trees. It moved and paused in the air, moved and paused, coming closer to the platform.

 More screams.

 *A bio-eye?* She thought over the death cry of yet another Aqjm. Below it, a scientist was running madly through the brush, heading directly for the platform. The Lead saw him dart between two trees and make a line towards her. Both of his arms were above his head, waving to catch her attention. Her growing sense of dread chilled her core.

 ––*What is it?* she screamed at her approaching team member.

 The Aqjm staggered, as if struck from behind, but there was nothing following it. It crashed and disappeared into the undergrowth. There was a ripple in the sea of green, as if something was feeding just below the surface, then it subsided. High above the area and just beyond, the bio-eye hung in the air and watched.

 Terror, the likes she had never experienced ever in her centuries old existence, seized her mind and she shrieked a single thought into the communication’s stalk. *––AUSH!*

She called and called, unawares of the silence descending upon the forest in the heavens, unaware of the slow approach of the bio-eye, heading in her direction. ––*AUSH!*

 The Lead Botanist glanced over her shoulder and saw the surveillance device bearing down on the platform and could not, for the very existence of her being, understand why security was not responding to her situation. She screamed again and again into the stalk, and realized at one point that she was even using her vocal cords.

 The Lead Botanist glanced behind again, heedless of the stillness surrounding her.

 There, suspended in the air just beyond the edge of the platform, was the floating bio-eye, studying her with its dark lens.

 Terrified, the Lead abandoned the useless stalk and ran to the platform’s edge. The bio-eye was right there. The Aush was manipulating it. *Only* the Aush could control it. She frantically waved her arms at the device and sent out frantic projections for aid.

 The bio-eye hung in the air and stared.

  *––AUSH!* she screamed out with both her mind and mouth.

 It was then something grabbed her ankles, brought her crashing down to the unyielding metal of the platform, and yanked her dazed form to the forest floor below, into the shadows smelling of earth.

**14**

 The blast door to the bridge opened all of two seconds, and only wide enough for a plaz-case to be shoved through a crack. Stricken with terror, the scientists did not think to go underneath the door. It was perhaps not wise. The manner in which the Aush was acting, he might have closed it on one of them.

 The Lead Anatomist grabbed the plaz-case and opened it. His smooth features frowned. The case was full of weapons. Worse, it was full of archaic weapons. His frown deepening, he pulled out a long shafted mace. Even with both arms, he could barely hold the weapon up. The others mulled around and looked into the case, a mixture of puzzlement and growing horror filling their heads.

 –*What is this?*

 *–Is the Aush truly unstable?*

 *–What does he expect us to do?*

 The Lead Anatomist knew what it was the Aush expected them to do. He spotted the floating bio-eye above, and wished he had the chance to prod the Aush with one of his surgical lasers under conditions of his choosing.

 –*He expects us to die*, the Lead informed the Aqjm standing about. –*The Kajst assigned to this mission has betrayed us.*

 –*Why?* some of the scientists wailed, still not understanding.

 –*Because,* the Lead Anatomist declared, –*the Aush is, simply put, a jealous, unprofessional*… and a foul stream of expletives erupted from the head scientist, aimed directly at the floating bio-eye.

 –*And he intends for this alien to kill us all*, the Lead finished.

 His projection stunned the scientists into dejected silence.

 –*But the Aush has made three mistakes,* the Lead Anatomist stated.

 –*What?* asked a geophysicist, her hands holding the pale hollows where a human’s fleshy cheeks would have been, her features full of fright.

 The Lead Anatomist did not reply right away. He knew he was correct in his thinking, and he struck a defiant pose for the bio-eye. He did not show the fear he knew the Aush wanted to see. He refused to. There was more to him than just research and eviscerations.

 –*He has armed us*, the Lead replied, locking a vengeful gaze upon the bio-eye, knowing the military Kajst received him. –*He has also forgotten that we are specialists in our chosen fields. We are the intellectuals of this mission. He is simply the brute force, and in locking us out, he’s proven his thinking is inferior. And*––he paused for dramatic effect––*he has left us access to the remainder of the ship. He has not locked us out. He has locked himself* in*. We have control of the rest of the ship. Most importantly, the* engines *of the ship. Engineer!*

 –*Lead Anatomist*, the Aqjm instantly reported back, nowhere near as terrified as the others.

 –*Take us to Engineering. The rest of you… choose your weapons.* Already a plan formulated within the Lead Anatomist’s head, and it was a simple one. He would take the remainder of the research team into the bowels of the star craft. With the engineer, they would not bother opening the door to the bridge. A direct confrontation with the Aush was predictably futile. While there were escape pods on this deck, no doubt locked out, the majority of them, however, were below. And the Aush knew that the engineer could effectively override the lock codes from his station, cripple the ship’s engines and perhaps even program them to self destruct while they made their escape to the nearest science station in orbit behind the Earth’s moon.

 –*What are we going to do?* asked the chronobiologist, hefting a short spear.

 The Lead Anatomist made a face. –*We are going to get out of here.*

 *–But there are others...*

 *–If they are not here by now, I suspect them to be dead.* With that, he walked towards the gravity well. The engineer marched right behind him, a spear in his fists. The rest of the bewildered scientists followed, struggling with the weight of their ancient weapons. They made their way to the gravity well, and the Lead Anatomist peered into its depths. The man in black was down there. Its primitive mind was no doubt struggling with its predicament. Probably curled up in a corner somewhere, with its senses lost. The Lead scoffed at the image.

 He stepped into the gravity well. The others followed, eleven of them in total, all clutching their weapons from the ages.

 The Lead Anatomist projected the level he desired, and the well lowered him and the others to where the engines and storage vats were located, four levels down.

 –*Can you disable the well from here?* he asked the engineer.

 –*Most certainly*. The engineer’s long fingers accessed a hidden panel to the right of the gravity well's opening. Lights glowed and died as a series of codes were entered. A low buzzing became audible, then abruptly ceased.

 The engineer turned back to the other Aqjm. –*Done. Now the other.*

 As a group, they marched towards the second gravity well, on the far side of the ship.

**15**

The Aush watched them leave the command level and instructed the bio-eye to follow. A glow of hatred began to burn for the Lead Anatomist. If the *hu*-man could kill that particular Aqjm, then all would be well within the universe. The scientist was clever, however, and the Aush reminded himself that, as much as he loathed the little Aqjm, he must not underestimate him. Not now, when his plans to kill the entire team were underway. The Aush considered the Lead Anatomist’s plan. It wasn’t a bad one, but there were escape pods on the bridge as well. If the game got out of hand, the Aush would initiate the destruct sequence of the ship, and he and his pair of Kajst would evacuate. The disabling of the gravity well might be a problem however. Not for the Kajst, but for the *hu-*man.

 He thought about his Kajst. They were engineered for battle, and not above killing one of their own species if necessary. He might have to send one or both of his soldiers after the Aqjm, though he did not want to. He wanted the *hu*-man to further demonstrate what it could do. It would also make it easier for the Aush to lie if the creature killed them. He switched to the bio-eye monitoring the man in black. It was difficult to see him in the shadows of the forest, camouflaged as he was. The creature had killed the entire science team in the botanical dome, the Lead Botanist being the last, almost too quickly for the Aush. And the *hu*-man moved without a sound. The Aush approved. Upon command, the bio-eye switched to a thermal sensor, and the shadow warrior’s glowing image filled the Aush’s view screen.

 What was even better, the *hu*-man was making its way out of the dome, back towards the same gravity well the Aqjm had used moments before. It reached the well at the same time the Aqjm below finished disabling the transport device. It paused at the threshold, like an animal sensing blood. It peeked in and studied the walls. Then it considered the ceiling behind it, and began unwinding a length of rope from its midsection, the same rope it had used to strangle an Aqjm earlier. The creature tied it to an overhead protrusion, and gave it a tug. It threw the rest of the rope into the well. Then the *hu*-man disappeared, downwards.

 The Aush was pleased. Resourceful. He wondered how many other surprises this shadow warrior possessed. The bio-eye followed the creature into the well, keeping back a respectable distance, and observing its progress.

 The man in black climbed back down to the lower levels.

 It had the scent of the Aqjm.

**16**

 They made their way across the ship, clustered together like a group of frightened young. The Lead Anatomist held his mace before him like a huge crucifix of war, his little mouth twisted in a snarl. He wanted the *hu*-man to show itself. They hadn’t been prepared when it attacked them the first time. They were ready now. Though they were not engineered for combat, the Aqjm were far from helpless and were more than capable of using the ancient weapons the Aush had supplied. The Lead Anatomist thought about the weapons. The Aqjm wished he possessed a plasma bolt or even a white-matter inhibitor. This business with the hostile specimen would be finished quickly if he did.

 –*Where is the creature*? one Aqjm asked, looking everywhere as the group moved up the corridor.

 –*Let it come*, one of two entomologists declared. She was armed with a short sword and wielding it as if she were a Kajst, swishing it from side to side.

 –*If we went back to our labs, we could access the cast-cloud canisters*, suggested the second entomologist. –*It would render the hu-man helpless*.

 –*We are deactivating the wells*, the engineer added. –*That is the first priority*.

 The Lead Anatomist halted the group at a junction. To their right was a long corridor leading to the engines and escape pods. There was no need for all of them to proceed, and he wanted to be free of the ship as soon as possible. He looked to the Aqjm behind him. –*Who else knows how to disable the gravity well?*

 A biotech raised his mace. –*I can, if given instructions*.

 –*We’ll save time if we split the group up*, projected the Lead.

 –*I believe that is a strategically poor decision*, the pedologist informed them.

 –*What do I care about what you think*? the Lead Anatomist snapped. –*You are far removed from your field of study*. *Who are you, one who studies soil samples, to think you know anything about strategy? I have not been in any armed conflicts, but compared to all my years of existence and research, you should remain still.*

 The pedologist did not dispute this, and lowered his eyes.

 –*I’ll give instructions for the gravity well,* the engineer broke in, saving the pedologist from further mental lashings.

 –*Do it then*, the Lead Anatomist ordered, and the engineer complied. The Lead glowered at the pedologist. He wanted to strike the soil-sampler for such impudence, and in front of the others. Who did he think he was?

 –*You four continue on to the well and deactivate it as quickly as possible.* The Lead commanded, singling out the sulking pedologist, and three others. –*The rest will follow me*.

 They obeyed without further question or protest. The smaller group broke away, heading towards the gravity well. The Lead marched down the dimly lit passageway, towards the ship’s engine, intent on sabotaging the starcraft. The Aush’s betrayal of the Aqjm enraged him. Too many good personnel had perished in the laboratory. He wanted to avenge them in spectacular fashion.

 They reached the chamber doors after a time, and the engineer thought-activated entry. Heavy metal doors slid open without a sound, and the Lead Anatomist looked to the two entomologists.

 –*Stand guard here and listen*, he commanded. –*Alert us if you sense anything. When the others get here, enter. We’ll have the pods ready.*

 *–If the specimen shows itself––*began the male entomologist.

 *–We’ll kill it,* stated the female*.*

 *–Not without me, you won’t,* the Lead Anatomist vowed, rage fuelling his vengeful thoughts.

With that, the leading Aqjm, along with the engineer with his spear, the two botanists armed with knives, and the chronobiologist who also carried a spear, filed past the two appointed guardians. Once inside the star lights of the chamber self activated, illuminating the room.

 The heavy door closed.

 Time passed. The entomologists regarded each other.

 –*I hope the bug comes this way*, the male projected, grasping his short sword.

 *–As do I*, added the female.

 –*The anatomists made a serious error this time.*

 *–I agree.*

 *–If only we were in the laboratory when it happened…*

 *–There would have been a different outcome,* the female stated.

 She suddenly jumped in her tracks, as if startled. The male gave her a puzzled look. Then he saw the dart, sticking out of the side of her head. The female opened her mouth to scream, but a star ripped into her chest, knocking her from her feet. Her sword clattered to the floor. The male spun about, and a shuriken took him in the eye, whipping it to the side in a supernova of pain. He was falling when the third shuriken hissed over his head and clattered off the metal door.

 Not quite dead, the female opened her mouth. The agony in her neck robbed her of coherent thought as well as command of her limbs. She could still see however, and to her horror, a dark shadow flittered up the corridor, like one of the huge species of hunting spiders they regularly captured and studied from the planet below. A single fang could be seen. Then the thing was standing over her.

 And the fang stabbed downwards.

**17**

 –*What was that?* an Aqjm projected with alarm. He leveled his spear at the closed door.

 The others faced the sealed entryway. There was no other sound.

 –*What do you think we should do?* a botanist asked.

 The chagrin in the Lead Anatomist’s single projection was unmistakable. –*Open the door and kill it!*

From where he stood over his panel, the engineer looked uncertainly at their leader. –*The escape pods are accessible now.*

 –*Open the door!* the lead Aqjm shrieked in their heads, overriding the engineer.

 They readied their weapons. The Lead Anatomist brought up his mace, the botanists gripped their knives, and the chronobiologist stood braced with his short spear. The engineer held his own spear at hip level with both hands. He reached out with his mind to activate the door. It opened. The Aqjm tensed.

 There, in an ocean of black life fluid, lay the two dead entomogists.

 The chronobiologist looked to the Lead. –*What is this cre--*

A star bit into his brow, whipping his head backwards.

 The man in black surged into the room. His sword swept up in a brutal flash, cutting the engineer from crotch to spear. As the engineer staggered back, a brave botanist lunged with his knife. The sword parried the knife to the outside and a hard hand-heel cracked into the scientist’s face, smashing cheek bone. The other botanist actually shrieked, a high childlike sound, and stabbed for the man’s chest. The man in black jumped away from the thrust. He held the sword before him at low guard. Black eyes met the compound eyes of the botanist and the scientist felt a stab a fear.

 The *hu*-man blurred forward, its sword dazzling in a series of cuts and stabs. The botanist jerked backwards, grossly outmatched. He jabbed with his knife in reflex. The man’s whirling sword took the smaller blade away from the botanist at the wrist. Black fluid splashed and a scream left the Aqjm’s mouth. Two long lines in the botanist’s chest were slashed open and bled ink. The scientist felt the strength leave his legs. He dropped to his knees, still holding his gushing wrist.

 The man in black spun about, his blade snapping out and stabbing the second botanist through the chest. The Aqjm with the broken face barely screamed before the sword was yanked out and stabbed into his flesh again. It punctured him a third time, the steel twisting to the left and then upwards and out, spraying black fluid in a thick arc. The botanist tripped and fell over the form of the engineer, landing flat on his back. The *hu*-man stabbed the Aqjm through the face.

 Turning back, the man in black pounced on the other, still kneeling botanist, and chopped an arm off. The scientist crumpled to the black floor, its features crunched in agony. The *hu*-man gutted him, going in through the back.

 Its mouth hanging open, the still breathing chronobiologist looked up, holding its terrible wound and wanting to desperately pull the weapon out of its head. Life fluid half-blinded him and he tried to stem the flow with his other hand. The pose struck looked pitiful in the dim light.

 The man in black hunched over, his dark blade held to one side. There was no mercy in his eyes.

 The chronobiologist tried to scream again, but a sword perforated his throat in one meaty punch.

**18**

From the bridge, the Aush watched the butchery from the angles of two bio-eyes. The speed of the *hu*-man’s attack was astounding, the ferocity without mercy. *As it might be*, the Aush thought to himself, remembering the experiments performed on the other captured *hu*-mans. There was never a question about the concept of revenge in the creatures. The Aush expected no less from the animal. But the manner, the techniques the creature employed to eliminate the Aqjm were fascinating. The beast was as precise with its weapons as one of the anatomists with its surgical instruments. The Aush held his own sword, flexing it, holding it the same way the *hu*-man did.

 Then he watched the creature kill the last Aqjm––the chronobiologist––and tense up. The Aush found himself shaking his head. It knew something was amiss.

 Without a word, the creature bounded up the passageway, in the same direction the Lead Anatomist was fleeing. The Aush sent the two bio-eyes off to monitor the hunt, and satisfaction coursed through his person. He knew that particular Aqjm was utterly pompous and arrogant. He could now label the scientist a fool and a coward. *Don’t need Kajst on research expeditions?* The Aush wished he could torment his adversary with the recorded events in the engine room and laboratory, just to crush the superiority complex the scientist possessed and consistently displayed.

 He doubted he would get the chance. The primitive was too skilled for the Aqjm. But before he had died, the engineer had successfully bypassed the emergency crafts’ locks.

 The Aush turned to one of the Kajst standing behind him. –*Go to the escape pods. Kill anything trying to access them.* The Kajst obeyed.

 The Aush continued to watch the screens, following the chase as it developed, and practicing the various chops, slashes, and stabs as demonstrated by the *hu*-man. His eidetic reflexes had recorded every movement, every attack the creature made. In seconds, he programmed his augmented reflexes to act as if he had years of training. It was in every Kajst’s engineering to quickly assimilate how a weapon functioned. He continued to practice the movements until he felt more than comfortable in his execution.

 In the minute it took, the Aush mastered the way of the sword.

**19**

 –*WAIT!* came the projection of sheer terror.

 The remaining Aqjm turned to see the Lead Anatomist running towards them, still carrying his mace. The biotech stopped entering codes. His attempts to disable the gravity well had failed, and it earned him the mental lashings of his edgy companions.

 –*Have you deactivated it?* the Lead Anatomist blurted out.

 –*No, I have not,* the engineer began. –*There was––*

 –*FLEE!* the Lead projected in terror and jumped into the gravity well. He immediately began to rise. Not needing any further encouragement, the four Aqjm followed him. Upwards, they rushed.

 Mere moments later, and braver now that he saw the well in use, Kazaka jumped into the device, meaning to end the hunt the moment he reached the top.

**20**

 The engineer was not dead.

 But he hurt so much, he knew he was close. It only took a glance down to see how badly the *hu*-man had damaged him. The creature’s weapon was so embarrassingly primitive and yet, it had taken the life from the Aqjm in an instant. Or at least put him on the painful path to death. Grimacing, the engineer looked down at his lower body and wished he had not. The weapon had cut him deeply down there, and he did not think he could move his legs. Purple viscera seeped through a long, fish-gill slash, and seeing his own guts spilled onto the floor filled the engineer with an almost overwhelming sense of futility. He was dying. He had only moments remaining.

 He attempted to move one of his legs, drenched in the black life fluid of the dead surrounding him. There was a deep, pain-sparkling *tug* from inside his abdominal cavity, and a little grunt of breath escaped him. *Fine*, the engineer thought through the dark matter of his mind, he was the star craft’s engineer. He knew all of the tricks.

 He inhaled and concentrated, projecting a mental command to a nearby console’s interface. Lights responded. The interface detached itself from the console, and floated towards him. Slowly, it came so very slowly. His vision blackened and returned, and he knew that he had little time. He didn’t want to expire in such a manner, in such a faraway place, but it was going to happen. Despair set in.

 Then the floating interface was before him, pulsating with luminous life.

 The engineer reached up. It was too high for him and his arms were too heavy. He commanded the device to come closer. When it rested on his chest, his spidery fingers did a slow dance across its glowing surface, initiating forbidden codes that only he was aware of.

 He did not have much time.

 But neither did his killer.

**21**

 The Lead Anatomist did not wait for the others. He reached the top level, and bolted from the gravity well as if escaping the pull of a black hole. He rushed to the first of three sealed hatches leading to the escape pods. His hand swept over an entry interface, turning it from purple to gold. The hatch hissed opened, and the interior of the pod illuminated with dull silver light. There were three pods located on the top of the starcraft, but one would suffice.

 –*Wait!* pleaded the pedologist as he and the last three members of the science personnel left the gravity well.

 The Lead whirled upon them. –*There are two other pods here,* he threw back at the emerging foursome. –*Take one of those. I have no time to waste on you.*

 *–Where are the others?* the geophysicist asked.

 –*Where do you think? Think for once in your miserable existence! They are all dead! The hostile executed them. Waste no further thought on the matter and get to the pods if you wish to sur––*the Lead Anatomist stopped projecting and stared. The others did the same.

 There, emerging from the mouth of the corridor leading to the bridge, stood a fully armed and battle-armored Kajst. It leveled its plasma weapon at the Lead Anatomist, its dark visor fearsome in the dim light.

 –*What are you doing, you imbecile?* The Lead bellowed. –*I am the Lead of this expedition. You obey* me*, not the Aush. That idiotic Kajst has become irrevocably unstable. Who do you think you are, to aim at my evolved person. Do you know how* superior *I am to your kind? Lower it! I command you to––*

 For an intelligent being, the Kajst thought the Lead Anatomist was being incredibly stupid. He fired. The plasma weapon blazed in the confinement of the upper level. The sound of rattling chains and the repeating muzzle flash, like an exploding star, cut the air. A single destructive line of light lashed out and cut the still projecting Lead Anatomist in half, flinging the two pieces inside the readied escape pod. The plasma bursts continued, and a small explosion erupted from the opened pod.

 The Kajst ceased firing.

 The silence was almost as frightening as the weapon discharge. Sparks and fires snapped and crackled from the ruined pod, filling the corridor with smoke. The Kajst stepped forward, weapon readied and seeking new targets. Knowing that the end was near, the biotech and the physicist threw down their weapons and began pleading for their lives.

 *Located*, the Kajst thought.

 The roar of plasma burst the silence, punching huge chunks out of the two willowy scientists and heaving their carcasses backwards. A firm advocate of overkill, the Kajst continued firing, blasting the burning body parts towards the gravity well. Plasma ripped into metal bulkheads, leaving deep melting craters and the smell of burning chemical compounds.

 In the dragon’s belch of continued weapon’s discharge, and under the cover of increasing smoke, the geophysicist grabbed the long arm of the pedologist and dragged him to the remaining pods. Her hand swiped the entry interface, turning it from purple to gold. The hatchway opened, sucking smoke inwards.

 The Kajst stopped firing.

 The two Aqjm fled inside the pod. Flinging the stunned pedologist to the deck, the geophysicist turned back and promptly sealed the pod’s hatch behind them. Through the grey smoke and light, she could see the green figure of the Kajst. The soldier was facing the gravity well, its helmet and visor searching for something. Then its armored form turned towards the closed portal.

 –*Initiate the launch!* the geophysicist commanded the pedologist.

 *–I don’t know how!* wailed the soil sampler.

 The Kajst aimed the plasma weapon at the closed hatch. Though a small view portal, it seemed as if the weapon was directed right at the geophysicist’s face.

 Then something rose up behind the soldier. It grabbed the Kajst’s armored head, and twisted it to the side. Without a sound, the soldier dropped to the smoke filled floor. Standing in its stead, was the man in black.

 The geophysicist almost cried out with relief. The *hu*-man regarded them, watching them through the smoke, and walked towards the sealed hatch.

 –*I found it!* projected the pedologist from behind her. –*Initiating launch now. You should strap in.*

The *hu*-man stepped up to the view portal. Its black eyes met the compound gaze of the geophysicist. Fear coursed through her again.

 But then the pod’s engines lifted the Aqjm up and away.

**22**

 Kazaka placed a hand on the surface of the closed doorway. He did not know how the magic worked. All he could do was watch as the creature that stared at him from within was lifted upwards. The metal thing they were in moved towards the ceiling, and did not stop. It slipped through the permeable bulkhead, like a raindrop entering the sea. Then it was gone.

 *Sorcery*, the Bear thought as he peered upwards, searching the smoke filled ceiling for a passage that was not there. Nearby and behind him, fires burned from the impressive weapon of the warrior whose neck he’d snapped. The Bear thought that was a close thing. He tried stabbing the warrior with his sword, but his steel would not penetrate the warrior’s armor. It was a good thing the samurai did not have such protection.

 Something made him tense. He could feel the approach of another on the air.

 Holding his sword, Kazaka disappeared into the smoke.

**23**

Never in a thousand cycles of this solar system’s sun did the Aush think that a *hu*-man could kill a Kajst. The bio-eyes recorded the death so that he could replay it as many times as he pleased. The smoke. A combination of the smoke and the carelessness of the firing Kajst resulted in its death. There was no remorse for the soldier. Soldiers died all the time. The Aush half turned to the remaining Kajst.

 –*Kill it.*

 The Kajst left, determined to do just that.

 The Aush watched on separate view screens as the escape pod pulled away from the starcraft. They were spared one death only to be delivered into a more spectacular one. The Kajst watched it for a short time. There was no rush here. The pod was well within range. With a thought, the Aush activated the starcraft’s outer weaponry. A targeting display converged on the fleeing pod.

 The Aush diverted his attention to the two bio eyes floating around beyond the bridge. The Kajst he had just dispatched entered *the neck*, the long walkway connecting the rest of the starcraft with the bridge. He looked back to the pod flying towards distant stars.

 And gave the mental command to fire.

**24**

 A microsecond before the Aush’s command was processed by the starcraft’s weapons systems, the engineer, with his last gasp, entered the final code.

 In his dying state, he had rushed things, and had made mistakes. Instead of all of the engines self-destructing, only one exploded. Mercifully, it was the one closest to him. A violent rush of force and flame consumed the engineer. The blast ripped through a bulkhead…

 And rocked the starcraft.

**25**

 The canon fired just as the explosion tipped the orbit of the ship. Bolts of plasma lanced out and grazed the escaping pod. It was far from being a direct hit, but it was enough to send the smaller ship into a tail spin, and send it earthwards.

 Inside, the pedologist and the geophysicist held on for dear life. They spiraled in momentary weightlessness until gravity was restored. The other systems remained offline or damaged, and the pedologist looked at the instrument panel with eyes full of despair. The shock of being fired upon was just settling in.

 –*They’ll pick us out of the atmosphere with the next blast!* he screamed in the geophysicist’s mind. She forced him out and clambered to the controls. She understood that the pods were programmed to fly themselves, but as far as she could tell, the blast from the mother ship had crippled it. Alarming symbols flashed in gold across view screens. She thought-tapped an interface, and a monitor displayed the image of their mother ship hanging in space. Fire flared briefly in the vacuum of space, and she remembered the engineer and felt a moment’s sadness.

 He did it.

**26**

 The Aush lost balance and his arms flew out to grab onto something. Moments later a second explosion jolted the ship. The starcraft stabilized itself, and the Aush jumped to the weapon’s control. He commanded the plasma batteries to fire upon the wounded escape pod, but the system would not respond. The Aush initiated a weapons’ check, but movement from one of the bio-eye’s view screens caught his attention, and stunned him into disbelief.

**27**

 Kazaka ran across the mouth of the corridor, a black shadow against a fog bank, disappearing behind a corner.

 Detecting movement, the approaching Kajst thought fired his weapon. Plasma roared, the blast splitting smoke. The Kajst continued walking along *the neck*, and fired straight ahead. His weapon repeatedly tore holes into the bulkheads, crippling the remaining escape pods. An explosion blew particles of metal outwards, and again the air filled with the heat of flame and the smell of unknown compounds melting.

 The Kajst ceased firing. He stopped walking.

 Kazaka jumped out from behind the corner. Shuriken flew from his hands, finding and ricocheting off the Kajst’s emerald green armor. The Kajst paused, analyzing the attack. The primitive was throwing its *stars* at him, and half a smile hitched up the soldier’s face.

 Kazaka leaned out again and another storm of shurikenandbo-shuriken flewinto the Kajst. They bounced off the armor with loud *whucks* and *pings*. One struck the Kajst in the head, actually snapping his helmet back, and momentarily distorting its visual display. It corrected itself in a second and the Kajst began to advance again, leveling its plasma weapon at the mouth of the corridor.

 The *hu*-man appeared again, poised with its sword.

 The Kajst fired.

 And blew himself apart.

**28**

 The green armor was too thick for the Bear’s *shuriken* to penetrate, that much was clear. So, Kazaka switched targets. He threw all of his star *shuriken* at the approaching emerald colored devil. Then he saw the muzzle of the weapon pointed at him. In a second, a quick *one-two*, the Bear threw one *bo-shuriken* at the face of the devil, knocking his head back.

 The second *bo-shuriken* went down theweapon’s throat.

 Then, in an act of uncertainty and chance, the Bear stepped out in full view of the warrior before him. He would end this with his sword. He stared down the creature in front of him, just as the weapon it carried exploded.

 The force of the blast and the flame that gouted forward drove Kazaka backwards. Fragments of hot metal sliced and sizzled through the air, slashing through his black garb and cutting him in several places. He fell to the deck, and grimaced against the burn and bite of his wounds. When the roar lessened, he looked about. He got to his knees, and pushed himself up with the guardsman’s sword.

 In the corridor, the green devil was on its back.

 Kazaka walked towards it, patting down the little glowing places in his garb before they could erupt into full flame. Behind his mask, his eyes narrowed. The devil before him was unmoving, and looking upwards. The front of its armor had been shredded, and parts of its exposed flesh had holes in it that went all the way through and glowed at the edges. Even the helm had been blown off, ripping one eye from its socket and destroying half of its face. The creature’s other eye flicked towards Kazaka and stared at him, like that of a dying fish.

 The Bear dropped to a knee. This devil was white underneath the green armor.

 There was no resistance as Kazaka put the tip of his sword to the devil’s throat.

 And stabbed.

 He withdrew the blade and stood. He looked up, and his breath caught in his throat. What he thought of as starlight before, was exactly that. The corridor he was in did not have any walls, just the floor he stood upon. Kazaka’s eyes went wide as he took in the star-filled heaven in all of its infinite glory. Stars, so many stars, winked and twinkled at him, and the beauty was so striking, he did not do anything. He gazed at the heavens, and looked downwards. There, he saw a huge star, awash in white and blue. He was amongst the gods, truly, and a sense of wonder enveloped him. Until this moment in time, he did not believe there was anything more beautiful than falling rain, or a rising sun. He stepped forward, and reached out with a hand to touch the heavens, but found he could not. The air before him stopped his fingers. The barrier was hard, warm to the touch, and invisible. It did not bother Kazaka so much, for if the magic revealed to him such wonders, how could it be evil?

 Then he heard a sound. He looked towards the end of the corridor.

 There, stood another green devil.

**29**

 The Aush pointed his plasma weapon at the man in black. Another explosion rocked the starcraft. The blasts had crippled the ship, and repairing it was beyond the commanding Kajst’s abilities. There was no hope. There was perhaps time enough to locate an escape pod and flee, but the Aush had been held back by the *hu*-man defeating and finally killing his remaining Kajst.

 Now, the Aush faced the creature alone. There was not much time, but he did not care. He had seen enough, but before he evacuated, he would gut this primitive taken from an insignificant rock in the blackness of space. He would gut him with a sword. He would show him that, to kill two Kajsts, two fully armored and armed Kajsts, was an incredible fluke.

 With one fist, it tapped its armored chest. “*Aush*,” he introduced himself to the *hu*-man, wanting the man to know his rank. The Kajst then dropped his weapon to the deck.

 Overhead, a comet split the cosmos.

 The Aush reached up, and unlocked the clasps that held his armor in place. He let it drop to the floor with a clatter. He removed the emerald armor protecting his arms and legs. He threw down his helm, but he covered his compound eyes with his black visor. He would kill the creature with it on. Then he brought up the sword, and slipped into a near perfect fighting stance.

 The Bear watched it all from where he stood amongst the stars. A white devil faced him, but this one was different from the ones he killed earlier. This one was more man-shaped, heavier and stronger looking. And it knew how to wield a blade. Kazaka slipped into his own fighting stance, and pointed the tip of the guardsman’s sword at the devil before him.

 “Come then,” Kazaka spoke in clear Japanese. “And we will dance underneath the stars.”

 The Aush had no idea what the *hu*-man said to it, but he advanced.

 The Bear did the same.

 And somewhere, just beyond the middle of the walkway, amongst the blazing heavens, they met.

**30**

 Kazaka attacked first, lunging with the katana and aiming for the devil’s midsection. The creature parried outwards, knocking the sword aside and thrust with its own blade. Kazaka ducked under this, dropping like a stone, and cut for bare legs. The devil leaped, spun in the air, and slashed out at nothing, for the Bear was already moving back to avoid just such an attempt.

 They faced one another again from behind their guards.

 The Bear moved forward, slashing and thrusting in a series of attacks he had studied since he was a boy.

 The Aush moved back, analyzing, studying, and finally parrying when his opponent’s sword came too close. He counter-attacked, smashing his blade forward, whirling it for a head, then arms, then the torso of the man in black. Incredibly, the *hu*-man either stopped his sword with his own, or got out of the way entirely.

 And countered.

 Kazaka’s sword came down from overhead, seeking to split the creature’s skull and the black stripe covering its eyes. The devil got out of the way. They traded blows then, attacking and countering at an ever increasing speed, the sound of steel on steel rising above the low rumble of flames and destruction from another part of the starcraft. Then the devil pressed forward, stabbing for the Bear’s legs. Each thrust was turned aside by Kazaka’s katana, but each new attack from the creature was faster than before, and was noticeably stronger. Behind his black mask, the Bear grimaced. *Magic*.

 Kazaka lashed out, attempting to drive the devil back, but it slipped inside his guard and slashed upwards, splitting cloth and skin and driving him back. He retreated a few steps, holding his katana at arm’s length, and gazed down at himself. His black robes had been cut from bottom to his chest. Blood seeped into cloth and Kazaka could feel the sting of where the steel parted his flesh.

 The Bear attacked again, thrusting low, then high, and cutting loose with a series of expert cuts and stabs. A samurai would have perished under the skilled onslaught

 The Aush deflected them all.

 On the last rush, a diagonal slash seeking to inflict a similar wound to that done by the devil, Kazaka found himself too close to the creature, who promptly cut off Kazaka’s right ear. The ringing of the wound caused Kazaka to retreat. He knew he’d been hurt badly.

 The white devil would not allow him.

 The Aush rushed in and slashed low, cutting across a knee of the *hu*-man and dropping him to the deck with a resounding *thud*. The Aush stabbed downwards, but somehow the man beneath him dodged out of the way. Worse, the man in black slashed outwards, causing the Aush to jump back to avoid having his lower legs removed. Then the *hu*-man was back on his feet. The nimbleness of the creature was to be applauded, but the Aush had finished his analysis of the *hu*-man before him. The attacks initiated by the man were somewhat predictable, and not at all difficult to deflect once he understood the methodology behind the offensive. It was only a matter of increasing the Aush’s already augmented speed and strength. He had enjoyed using the primitive weapon up to this point, but he now decided that he was wasting time.

 Kazaka dropped back, his last three shuriken flying at the white devil.

 The Aush deflected them all as he advanced. The last missile weapon, a long spike*,* was slapped out of the air with a growing impatience. Such trickery was beneath him. He closed with the *hu*-man, backing him up against the plaz-wall. It was time to end the study session.

 The Aush unleashed a series of slashes and cuts, lunges and ripostes. For a moment, his opponent actually stood in front of him and absorbed the brunt of the attack. But then one slash got inside the *hu*-man’s guard, splitting him from chin to crotch. Blood splashed onto the deck. Another cut opened up a long gash on the inside of the man’s arm, and he dropped the sword. A final chop took his leg half off, just below his good knee, and he crashed to the floor. The Aush loomed over the fallen man and raised his blade two-handed, intending to thrust downwards and kill the bug at its feet.

 Kazaka’s hand snaked out. It clamped down on the bare white flesh of the Aush’s inner thigh. His stone-tough fingers rolled up, clenching loose flesh and compressing into a fist, and the Bear then demonstrated the *shako-ken*.

 Or shark bite.

 The Bear’s hand ripped a chunk of skin off the devil’s body as if it were wet paper. Blackness burst onto the floor. The Aush’s head snapped back in shock and agony and the claws of the Bear fastened onto and ripped out another chunk, on the same leg. The Aush came crashing down. The Bear clambered up over the fallen devil, pulling out huge fleshy lumps of white tissue from the alien underneath him, while its black blood geysered. A chunk from his inner groin, a sizeable amount of skin covering the creature’s obliques, a handful from the chest. Black life fluid fountained and pooled on the deck. Then the Bear placed a bloodied hand on the devil’s throat, and pulled himself close…

 When the Aush stabbed him through the guts.

 Kazaka felt the steel enter him, twist, and stay. He reached down and gripped the Aush’s wrist, snapping it with one motion. The Bear then let the throat go and ripped the visor from the Aush’s face. He pulled forth his *ninjato,* which had yet to taste the devil’s black blood, and nailed it through the creature’s exposed chest.

 In agony, the Aush blinked. His strength left him in a rush. He could only stare at his killer’s face closing with his own.

 The Bear gazed into the devil’s eyes. He placed his hand back over his prey’s throat, and bared teeth lined in red.

 “*Ninja*,” came the word.

 With his remaining strength, the Bear gripped his enemy’s soft flesh… and ripped.

 Kazaka threw away the meat in his fist. White devil. Black blood. They *still* died like a man. The floor beneath him rocked and bucked, like a horse being trained to take a saddle for the first time. He rolled onto his side, and inched towards the nearby wall. He no longer cared if it were magic or not, Kazaka placed his back against it, and propped himself up. He inspected his person, and saw the guardsman’s sword that would soon rob him of his breath. Kazaka felt the buzz of his other wounds, but he smiled in spite of it all.

 He was still in better shape than the bastard at his feet.

 Something exploded again, and the floor began to thrum with a frightful energy. Like an approaching typhoon, Kazaka thought dreamily, and blinked. He looked above the bloody corpse at his feet, and once more, for the last time, took in the heavens above.

 Another explosion. Greater this time.

 Kazaka did not care. The feeling left him, seeping out like water slowly emptying from a vessel. He gripped the hilt of the blade in his guts. When he finally crossed over, he wanted something in his hand to swing at the gods. Just in case.

 And there, high above the Earth that birthed him, as the invisible walls of the starcraft failed and a great sucking wind flung him out into the star-filled void, Jimmu *Kuma* Kazaka felt, for the briefest of time, what it was like to fly.

**31**

 On a screen, the geophysicist and the pedologist watched in silence as multiple explosions shook and ultimately destroyed the starship they had inhabited for centuries. The interior of the pod had gone from being a gold light to that of universal red. Alarm klaxons warned them repeatedly that things were not well, for all the good it did them. Neither of them knew the first thing about even maneuvering a pod, let alone repairing one. Trailing smoke and the occasional chunk of debris, the escape pod fell planetward.

 The two Aqjm strapped themselves into their seats and regarded each other.

 –*We’re falling towards the planet*, the pedologist commented, eyeing a panel full of screaming navigational instruments.

 –*Yes*, the geophysicist agreed, and felt the burst of panic within her breast.

 –*I’m sorry*, the pedologist said.

 –*Why?*

 –*For not being able to help more.* The sadness in the pedologist’s projection caused the geophysicist to look up.

 Then, with whatever resolve she had remaining, she hid her own fear and doubt. ­–*Do not worry. We’ll will survive.*

 *–Really?*

 *–Yes.*

The pedologist smiled at her then, and for a moment, the geophysicist wondered if he actually believed her. In the end, she supposed it did not matter.

 –*We’ll be fine*, she repeated, and looked upwards, towards the stars, for what she knew in her heart to be the last time.

 The little pod skimmed the surface of earth atmosphere, enduring terrible heat and lighting up as bright as a comet. It trailed smoke at times, and pieces of debris kept falling from it. Lower and lower it flew, across one of the planet’s huge oceans. It burned a trail across the night, flying lower still, until it came to its final resting place in a blaze of light.

 Near a small settlement in New Mexico…

 Called Roswell.