

Sample file

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I encourage and invite the creation of fan-fiction and fan-art based on my characters.

I find that fan-fiction and fan-art are wonderful ways to practice the skills necessary to be an artist or writer and also consider it a sign of a healthy amount of attention for the work.

I create stories for the joy of creating a story that I enjoy and in telling a story I hope that others will enjoy.

If you enjoy this story, then I am glad and I hope that you would pass on word about it to other readers that might enjoy it.

NOTE

If you do create fan-art or fan-fiction, please go to <http://thrythlind.deviantart.com> and drop me a note, I'd like to see it.

Cast (In Alphabetical Order)

Divine Blood makes use of names from several cultures and languages and to make it easier to keep track, many of the characters are listed here.

Amber Lot – Bravura’s Omni-Friendly Student Body Secretary.
Damir Milos – A teenaged mercenary ordered to learn to fit in with civilians.
Darrin Marsh – A self-important British student.
Deimosu Semezou – The over protective brother of the Semezou Triplets.
Eija Semezou – An unwillingly goth girl who has issues.
Eowyn Desai – An American of Indian descent and mercenary pilot.
Gaetana Trolleti – Commander of Avalon’s Oceania region forces
General Muang – An ambitious Burmese general.
Hannah – The leader of Deimosu’s unwanted following.
Hel Logesdottir – A bitter girl with something of a chip on her shoulder.
Issa Massri – An Egyptian boy with a fascinations for robotics.
Jason Orin – The somewhat geeky Bravura Student Body Treasurer.
Karl Raske – The confusing and bizarre Bravura Student Body President
Leroy Jackson – The *Melian*’s doctor.
Lilitu Geisthexe – Hel’s supposed aunt.
Lizbet – Lilitu’s pet....cat?
Mao Semezou – Mother of the Semezou Triplets. Exorcist and mercenary.
Maria – The most athletic of Deimosu’s unwanted following.
Marsha Lanister – A busy body student with eyes on the Student Council
Moloch Baal – A man who works with Lilitu and Shu.
Naiki Semezou – A reckless young warrior with a friendly attitude.
Sherissie Minaba – There. Are. No. Words.
Shu – An Egyptian man who works with Moloch and Lilitu.
Thalia Charite – A pleasantly plump woman who is acquainted with Lilitu.
Ushitana – The Commander of the *Melian*
Wen – The shyest of Deimosu’s unwanted following.
Whelan Connor – A mercenary sniper and ladies’ man.
Wilhelm Jarvis – An intelligence agent for Avalon
Yakub Sarkis – The second in command of the *Melian*
Yoon-Ji Jeon – The much feared Bravura Student Vice President

Conversation At A Tea Party

"He's trying again. Being a bit of a headache about it."

"Yes, well he always has had his opinion on what should be."

"Oh yes, I thought I noticed that. Rearranged a few things.

Rather a pest."

"The only thing I'll give him is that it is a bold plan."

"He always does play the game well."

"Headache, opinion, pest, bold, game. I wish you'd find a better choice of words."

"We all know the stakes, but speaking grimly won't help us."

"I suppose that is true, but it still seems disrespectful."

"Let's move on to the task. Who is past and who is future?"

"Could you pass the Earl Grey?"

ACT I

First Day

This Looks Like a Safe Neighborhood

“This looks like a safe neighborhood,” the red-headed woman said as she stood on the roof of one of a number of empty buildings, looking out with a pair of purple eyes.

There were a handful of people here and there, but for the most part the entire place was empty. A bunch of abandoned shops and stores surrounding what had been a fairly large warehouse in more prosperous times. It would not have been considered a safe neighborhood by most people’s standards. In fact, unless the inevitable squatters were considered, most probably wouldn’t have even called it a neighborhood.

This was one of the selling points for her.

The other was the sleeping lines of energy that flowed into and out of the area. Whoever had set up business here wasn’t a complete fool. The entire area was vibrant with creative energy just waiting to be tapped. Everything from the lines of the streets in the area to the facing and floor plans of the buildings had been designed with ease of travel in mind. The effect made the flow of ambient energy stronger, if also unrefined.

However, the people who had built here had failed to account for the fact that the entire region was naturally easy to overlook. Approaching the warehouse at the center, the ground sloped upward gently and consistently until one came within about two miles of the warehouse, which is when everything sloped downward into a slight bowl. From the layman’s perspective outside, one looked up and only saw a line of buildings, old buildings now that the area was mostly unpopulated. The bustling of business at the center would have gone unnoticed and only the people in the know would have been able to find it. Nobody would have simply been drawn there by curiosity.

That trend was duplicated on the spiritual level, isolating the area above like an island in the flows of ambient life and energy. It was a very bad place for anyone running a business depending on attention and new clients, but for someone who wanted a place both vibrant and secret, it was perfect. Sitting down casually, the red-headed woman retrieved a cell phone and started checking accounts over the internet.

She was a tiny woman of clear Asian descent, despite the vibrant red hair. For the moment, she was dressed casually in jeans and a white shirt with a red jacket. It would be hard to guess her age, but she couldn't have been younger than her late twenties and was probably somewhere in her mid-thirties. The clothes were fashionable and high-quality though not extravagant. She looked more like some middle-class housewife out for a walk rather than someone contemplating a major real estate purchase.

A satisfied expression came over her face and then she pitched herself off the side of the roof with all the attitude of a person hopping off a stage to the floor below. She hit the ground thirty feet below as lightly as if she were taking a simple step and then thrust her hands into her pockets and started strolling down the street, whistling to herself.

The red-headed woman didn't pause at all as she felt some of the scavengers of the area finally taking notice of her as she headed on to leave the area. The auras were weak but clear as they moved about out of balance with themselves, each other and the world around them. They wouldn't be even a casual threat to her children, much less herself.

This was why she barely even yawned as the first of the thugs leaped out in front of her, gun in hand.

"Hold it right there, lady!" the thug said with a smirk on his face.

The smile vanished as his intended victim simply turned to the side a little and kept walking as if he wasn't a concern. In fact she barely acted as if he was there at all. Two other thugs stepped into the street at the same time and the three exchanged glances, trying to figure out exactly what this woman was thinking.

"Didn't you hear what I was saying, lady!" the thug with the gun demanded.

When he failed to get any response from her, he snapped a curse and fired his gun at the back of her head. The red-haired woman shifted her head to the side and turned slightly as if to look back at the thugs. The bullet moved on past her harmlessly at the same time and didn't even seem to faze her.

"Do you really want to try this?" she asked casually.

"Listen, lady," the thug said, brandishing his gun again. "I ain't about to take no guff from some tiny Geisha girl who got lucky. Now, if you don't want this to get messy, then you're going to have to hand over your money right now."

"All right," she said. "Do you have a palm reader?"

"A what?" one of the thugs asked.

"A biometric palm reader," the woman repeated. "Maybe a retinal scanner?"

"What the hell does that crap have to do with anything?" the thug demanded.

“Well, without either of those,” she said. “I’m not going to be able to give you any money, didn’t take out any cash yet, so I’m not carrying anything.”

After all, she wanted to establish that she’d been looking into matters in the neighborhood. Coming out of nowhere with large amounts of money attracted a bit too much attention.

She shrugged and started to walk away from the situation, chastising herself silently for provoking the fools this way. When she felt the harmful intent forming this time, she didn’t step out of the way and let the bullet strike her in the back of the head. It rocked her head forward, but she kept her balance with no trouble at all.

Yawning again, she reached up to the back of her head and scratched it, without stopping her walk. A small caliber, poor-quality round fired by someone of no skill, that wouldn’t even leave much of a bruise, much less anything to worry about. Like hitting her with a pebble, they’d have to be an out and out master gunman to threaten her with that pathetic weapon and ammunition combo. And that was aiming for areas of the body that weren’t really available from the back. Where they were, they couldn’t even hurt her by sheer bad luck.

“Di...did you just see that?!” one of the thugs demanded shakily. “The bullet just bounced off.”

“Had to be some kind of trick,” another said determinedly.

“Fuck this! I’m doing this the old fashioned way,” the third snapped angrily.

With a roaring cry he charged forward down the street at the small woman’s back. The woman kept walking until the thug was within arm’s length of her. At that point, she stepped back, stepping into the arc of the man’s haymaker and simply pointing her shoulder out with a slight lean.

To all appearances, the thug might as well have run full tilt at a granite statue; the impact was largely the same. The red-headed woman didn’t even flinch or shift, never took her hands out of her pockets as the thug whimpered briefly and collapsed into a shivering mess at her feet.

“Are we finished?” she asked, arching an eyebrow as the thug at her feet groaned weakly.

Not getting an answer, she went back to her walk.

Behind her, the thugs scrambled to collect their friend and carry him off, hopefully to a hospital but he should survive either way.

As she walked along, she caught sight of a tiny fluttering butterfly and bit off an irritated curse as she held out her hand for it to land. Once in her palm, it quickly changed from a beautiful insect into a piece of folded parchment which she worked open and read.

“They know I’m out of town,” she muttered as the buildings around her shifted from abandoned and empty shells to brighter and more bustling store fronts.

She'd left the little patch of obscure urban rot and entered the larger portion of the small city. As she read what the letter had to say, she did snap out an under the breath curse as she refolded the parchment after adding her own short note to the message. Then she held it tightly in the darkness of her palms as she concentrated firmly.

Opening her hands again, the parchment was again a butterfly flapping into the air before vanishing around a corner, off to find the next closest person who could help.

"I guess I was the closest one it could find," she muttered. "Wrong place, right time."

She turned a corner and pulled out her cell phone to take a look at the public case history.

American girl missing for two days.

Confirmed abduction.

Picking up her pace she frowned as she kept reading. It wasn't her sort of thing, but a kid's life was at stake, so she was moving following her phone's GPS to the hotel where the majority of the witnesses seemed to be. It was already surrounded by reporters from all over the place of course and the woman shook her head in exasperation. However that did give her a good opening for information gathering.

Stepping into the edge of the crowd of journalists, she was about to snatch up a camera and mix with the herd when a voice called out.

"Mao Semezou," the man's voice said. "What are you doing here?"

Pausing and looking to the side, she arched an eyebrow in surprise to see a familiar face start walking across toward her at the edge of the crowd. Several of the journalists seemed to take an interest as the man recognized her.

"What am I doing here," she repeated. "You're a bit far from your normal stomping grounds yourself."

"You know this person, Hendelson?" one of them asked.

Hendelson was tall and broad-shouldered, virtually dwarfing Mao as he walked over toward her. By his voice and character, he was American, but anybody watching carefully could see where he'd picked up some habits from his time reporting in Europe.

"Yeah, Miss Semezou is a bit of an amateur web-journalist," he said. "I give her advice from time to time."

Mao scoffed visibly and crossed her arms, that same eyebrow arching higher.

"Oh, just what we need," another reporter said, "Some blogger trying to get the scoop."

"I'll talk to her, all right?" the tall man said in an appeasing tone as he gestured for Mao to follow him off somewhere quiet. "Let's go talk about not stealing cameras, shall we?"

The red-headed woman waited a little bit before voicing her disapproval.

“Amateur,” she said coolly.

“Well, you aren’t a professional reporter,” he commiserated. “And this way you’re under the radar. Are you here about the insect-man? Something to do with Socrates Group?”

“Socrates Group collects artifacts,” the small woman said with a dismissive wave. “This isn’t their sort of thing. Nah, I think the Vollstahl police brass talked to Psyche and Psyche sent out a general call. I just happened to be the closest to the site. Can you get me to the witnesses?”

“Afraid not,” Henselson said. “They aren’t letting anybody inside there. Hotel security is trying to keep the kids and their teacher sheltered. They barely let the police inside. Best I can do is to give you a room number.”

“That’s enough,” the red-head said. “Anything else you can give me?”

“Not going to ask why I’m a few thousand miles away from my normal beat?” the reporter asked.

Mao idly tapped her wrist where a lot of other people would wear a watch.

“Right, kid in danger, what was I thinking?” he said. “The victim and the witnesses are part of some sort of international symphony. She’s first violin or something like that. The attacker snatched her outside of their last performance when she wandered a bit away from the rest. All the reports say he’s some sort of monster. And if you’re here...”

“Yeah, don’t get ahead of yourself,” Mao said. “And even if it is, you know the drill.”

“Same one as always, yeah,” he said shaking his head. “I get the exclusive once the secret can be revealed. Until then, all this stuff is a conspiracy theory.”

Henselson nodded with the sound of a long-suffering sigh.

“The witnesses are all on the fifth floor,” he said, “Pretty much an entire hallway there.”

The reporter pointed up toward the indicated location and then glanced back toward Mao, but the small Japanese woman was already gone.

Mao landed lightly on the edge of a balcony at the second floor before leaping off again, straight upward this time and coming to a graceful landing at the top of the arch. Then it was just a matter of opening the balcony door to the empty room beyond.

Stepping out of the empty hotel room, she let herself feel the flow of chi in and out of the hallway, feeling the weak traces of untrained human beings made stronger by emotional upheaval. Her hands brushed against door knobs and walls as she worked to pinpoint the heaviest bit of emotional upheaval and came to something surprising as she passed one of doors.

There was a lingering trace of chi that felt just the slightest bit off in that room. It hadn't returned for at least a couple of days, but it had been strong enough to leave an imprint that Mao could still recognize.

She knocked firmly on the door and waited.

"Who is it," a nervous voice asked.

"Investigator," Mao said.

The door opened slightly and a nervous slice of a face looked out through the crack.

"Have you found her...?" the girl on the other side stopped as she took in Mao's decidedly civilian appearance. "Are you sure you're the police?"

"Give me a break, kid," the red-headed Japanese woman said. "They called me in from my vacation. I'm just trying to get your friend found as soon as possible."

There was a hesitant sound to the girl's voice, but she eventually unlocked the door and let Mao inside.

"All right, I'm sorry," she said apologetically as the small Japanese woman pushed her way into the hotel room. "Please come inside."

"Don't worry about it," Mao said with a friendly dismissal. "Can you show me the...what's her name?"

"Katrina Strnad," the girl said nervously. "And she has her things over here..."

The girl walked over to a suitcase and carry-on bag. It was all a bit small for the average teenage girl on vacation. Then there was the violin case. Apparently Katrina traveled light.

There was a small fridge built into the counter of the room and Mao opened it up to reveal a small selection of bottles filled with some reddish liquid which she pulled out and opened up. A good whiff gave her everything she needed to know.

"Does she drink this?" Mao asked.

"Once a day," the girl answered. "I always teased her that it smelled like blood."

It wasn't blood, but a chemical comparison between this and human blood would probably have come out eerily similar. Everything a growing young vampyr needed without the guilt of draining a person dry.

"What color are her eyes and hair?" Mao asked.

"Ummm, brown and... almost black, I think," the girl said.

Common human colors.

Nothing funky like being a full-blooded Japanese lady with flaming red-hair and purple eyes. That meant she might have been born outside one of the families and not even know what she was.

Mao took a moment to shake her head with a sigh and ponder about how inconvenient it was for evolution to add psychic powers or physical

deviations to people outside the existing community. This meant she might have to pull out the whole “so you’re a psychic” lecture.

“Did you see which way the guy took her?” the woman asked as she moved to the bathroom and started looking for something that carried a bit of off-human chi. She found it in the form of a hair from a brush.

“He went east from the theater,” the nervous girl said. “Is she going to be all right?”

“Yeah, we’ll make sure she is,” Mao said with an encouraging smile as she moved toward the hallway. “Oh, kid, one thing.”

“What is it?” the nervous girl questioned.

“I never said I was police,” Mao said. “I just said I was an investigator. I’m more the private type. And you could have just let in someone very bad. Next time ask for ID before you let someone in.”

The girl stared at her slack jawed a moment before slamming the door closed.

Hoping the lesson was learned, the red-headed woman moved to the elevators and called for one. She was walking out the hotel door mere minutes later and then pushing her way past the waiting journalists.

One of the reporters that had dismissed her as an amateur of some kind did a sort of double-take as she walked by, but failed to catch sight of her on the second look to confirm that he’d really seen her. The red-head could have simply gone through completely unseen, but there was a degree of notice such methods brought that Mao usually tried to avoid. Especially when it was entirely unnecessary, she did wave briefly at Hendelson and gave him a thumbs up.

Reaching into her pocket, she withdrew what seemed to be a necklace of crystal beads of varying colors. There were green, blue and red crystals assembled together and she tied the hair she’d taken around the beads before encircling it around one of her wrists like a Buddhist or Catholic rosary. She was one of a rare few, the only one she knew of currently living, that could naturally see the trails of life-force, but like a magnifying glass or compass, the extra tool was useful.

Arriving at the theater gave Mao a sharp moment of relief as she took in the lingering feelings of shock and fear that had pervaded the area at the time of the incident. The green crystals of her rosary glowed just faintly enough for her to notice. The trace was already faded past what she could see unaided, and had almost faded away so completely that even the bracelet wouldn’t have made it noticeable.

Glancing east, the first thing she noted was the hill on which sat the warehouse she was inquiring about. Ordinarily she’d have considered the site a perfect place to hide given it was naturally predisposed to going unnoticed, but she’d just spent the better part of a day poking around that neighborhood and there wasn’t anything there that stood out.

Which meant following the beads in Mao's hands, which was going to be slow based on how weak the girl's aura was. She was probably not further down than the tenth ring, and that was a generous guess.

Walking down the street as the night deepened, she moved slightly one way or another, watching for the glow in the beads to turn weaker or stronger. And that was how she came to the base of a deeply wooded hill she might otherwise have never noticed at all. But she was here now, standing at the base of it and bending down to examine the grass path that invited her upward.

A brief examination found a tiny rivulet, carved once by hand and maintained by the flow of rainfall in all the time since, where the darkness of yin streamed down from an unseen pool up above, a reservoir of yin that looked up at the sun.

That was impressive.

Also, apparently being misused at the moment.

Taking a deep sniff of the air, she stood up and pushed upwards. Immediately, she felt a sense of calming that paradoxically upset her. She didn't like being reminded that she was pushing the borders between human and ... something else. Perhaps she had even already crossed it. Years of chi-mastery, curses, her damn passenger and certain ... relations with powerful spirits had been driving her further and further toward being more a creature of the supernatural; places of heavy chi like this held a very physical sense of relief for her as a result.

"Not like I was all that far away to begin with," she muttered, fingering her red hair idly.

As she spoke, she came out of the trees into a small clearing at the apex of the hill and found what it was she was looking for: a veritable pool of dark chi surrounded by foreign-planted grey oaks looking up into the sky. In the center of the little bowl was a hole in the ground down into which a ladder descended.

Taking a brief walk around the edge, Mao examined some of the signs and feel of the place.

The blue crystals glowed faintly as she walked around the edges of the bowl, fingers trailing along the bark of the gray oaks. That made her uncomfortable as well, though most would have been comforted to find traces of white magic in the area. It had to be expected, of course, certain types of trees made white magic easier to perform and oaks were high on that list.

Mao didn't use the ladder to get down into the hole, simply dropping down silently and avoiding any creaks or cracks that the old tool might have had in store for her. In doing so, she dived through a thick clump of sickeningly corrupted chi that had her covering her mouth and shaking her head clear. Landing just slightly off balance from the supernatural assault, she stood up and steeled herself.

One foot inscribed a line in the dust on the ground and drew a circle about it as each of her hands jabbed to the side and traced similar lines in the dust on the walls. A soft green glow worked up out of her and into the air and earth around and pushed back at the old trap, shattering it completely.

Grimacing and looking about, she saw old, very old signs of blood caking the walls. A deliberately laid trap to hold off exorcists, but it was old and out of date. Dependence on only using yang was something that most credible exorcists had moved away from over three hundred years ago. Nor was the trap maintained, it was a weak bit of surprise but that was all.

Whatever had originally desecrated this holy site had long ago either died or abandoned the location. Whoever was taking up residence now had either not recognized the chi trap or didn't know how to keep it up. Which meant it wasn't likely to be a psychic or paranatural threat.

That wasn't the same as no threat at all.

Wrapping herself up in the flows of chi, she stepped forward into the corridor ahead, keeping aware for any other old chi trap that might lay waiting for her. But then the woman stepped out into a wide room that shocked her senses yet again.

She stood in an ancient lava chamber, the walls virtually glowing with yang as yin seethed in the center until it was forced back through the corridor behind Mao up into the world above, forming that trickle that she'd found at the base of the hill.

Yang concealing yin, which concealed yang, the duality of the universe in perfect sequence.

It was such a moment of surprise that she dropped the cloak about her and almost failed to note the motion of a knife slashing her way. At the last moment, she dodged out of the way and the knife passed through where her neck had been before. Likely, it wouldn't have gone through, but unlike with the thugs before, there was no certainty of that.

"What demon comes to this holy place?" the man behind the knife demanded.

Mao had expected something like this. The man was long and spindly, almost anorexic, with deep, sunken eyes and hollow cheeks. His jaw standing out against his skin could certainly look almost insectile in the wrong light; and those long strands of standing hair looked something like antennae.

"Shut up," she said coldly, retaliating with a simple strike into the man's face.

The killer tried to dodge, but Mao was already moving to handle that and casually struck out horizontally to slam the psychopath into the wall and unconsciousness with barely a concern.

That just left finding the girl.

The first alcove held a girl certainly, preserved by the flowing yin in the room beyond the walls, but she had still been dead for at the very least a

month. The body hung from chains that pulled her back tight against the wall, a host of small cuts were slashed into her skin through the tatters of clothing and cloudy, half-rotted eyes stared outward.

The red-head wasn't surprised that the girl's body was still heavy with chi, or that she sported a pair of matted tails hanging limply from her lower back. Someone with the instincts, if not training, to find this place wouldn't go after just anyone. No, he'd be drawn to weirdoes like Mao, like this poor kitsune girl and like a vampyr. Like attracted like, and unfortunately sometimes a thing that was like was decidedly hostile.

"Got him, kid," Mao whispered quietly as she closed the girl's eyes and continued searching.

The missing girl was in another alcove, again with chains recently spiked into the walls with little in the way of real respect, though the freak had probably thought it was a reverential act. She was weak and barely conscious, breathing tiredly. Breaking the chains off her, Mao took the girl onto her shoulder gently and waited for Katrina to steady herself as much as she could.

"Don't worry," she whispered comfortingly. "I've got you."

The thin killer shook awake and stood up to see Mao helping the young girl forward, towards the exit.

"You will not remove that demon from this place of purification!" he shouted.

The girl on Mao's shoulder flinched fearfully at the sound of the voice and tried to back away from it. The fear was cut off by the sound of a bone-shattering crunch and the sight of the killer's body twisting across the room to slam in a twisted mass against the wall.

"If you'd stayed down, freak," Mao said. "I might have let someone arrest you."

"He's dead?" Miss Strnad asked.

"Definitely," the exorcist said firmly. "And I'll have to come down and purify this place later. Don't worry about it, kid. We're just going to get you to some place that can help you and then call your teachers."

The girl nodded and weakly leaned into the tiny form of the red-headed woman, falling back into unconsciousness as Mao carried her out of the underground chamber.

The next week found Mao back in Europe, at least temporarily.

Behind her, her children were busy with their assorted tasks. Eija was working at dismantling the dormant defenses, just in case someone came in after them and set them off. Deimosu was packing the weapons and various crystals for delivery to their new home. And Naiki...

Mao rolled her eyes and shook her head as she looked across at Naiki, currently leaning out the window and staring down toward the village courtyard below with an appreciative smile on her face. Coming up behind the

green-haired girl, Mao looked out the window and found that, yes, there was at least one blond in easy view down the hill. Actually there were two, a sun-kissed surfer boy and his girlfriend, both scantily dressed and getting ready to head on down to the coast for some fun on the beach.

“Naiki,” Mao said in a clear tone.

The girl’s hand slipped out from under her and her chin dropped to the window frame as she flinched in surprise.

“Ahhh, Mum!” she snapped quickly, standing up straight and rubbing needlessly at her chin as her shark-tail braid bounced behind her with her embarrassment. She’d done more damage to the frame than it had done to her.

Naiki was taller than her mother. The tiny red-head probably topped out at five feet tall, if that. Naiki was almost five foot ten inches with shoulders Mao was certain had not been inherited from her. The sharp row of teeth was also a good sign as to exactly which of the suspects had donated the rest of Naiki’s genetics.

“I was, uh, just taking a little break,” Naiki said nervously before sliding around, keeping her face toward Mao. “I’m getting right on that packing, almost done in fact.” Then she broke for one of the other rooms in the old monastery they’d appropriated for the last two years.

“Always doing something stupid,” her son said as he watched his sister leave the room. “I’ll bet she causes World War Three somehow.”

Deimosu was a little bit taller than Naiki and thus also towered over his mother, Mao. His hair was a brilliant golden blond and he had the build of a classical Greek hero. Not the overdone masses of muscle from those movies in the sixties, but a real perfection of proportion. Sometimes, the only thing Mao saw of herself was what she’d taught and her own confidence from before she’d had to build it back up.

“Let me worry about your sister,” Mao said. “How’s your end coming?”

“Almost done, Okaasan,” he said gesturing to the small arsenal of swords, staves, axes and the like. “Unlike some, I’m not ogling people instead of working.”

He shivered then and glanced back over his shoulder to see his mother staring at him pointedly.

“Right, I’ll let you worry about Naiki,” he said.

Mao nodded and set about her own tasks, setting the seals they would use to transport the bulk of this stuff. It seemed rather a mundane use for a skill meant to trap powerful, unkillable foes in a separate reality for an indeterminate amount of time, but it did work.

“Mitera,” Eija said then, turning back to look over her shoulder. “Mr. Harker is coming up the path.”

Eija was only a couple of inches taller than Mao. Her skin was pale, though not quite to albinism, and her irises were a deep, blood red. Sometimes the sclera, the normally white portions of the eye, shared the same color, but she usually didn't enjoy opening those eyes. Her black hair was kept long, hanging down to her waist in a single braid. It was long enough that she could cut it herself and not have to sit underneath anyone using a pair of scissors or other sharp instrument.

Mum.

Okaasan.

Mitera.

They each had their preferred language and level of formality for referring to her.

As she nodded, Mao wondered what the girl she'd been a month too late to save would have called her mother. Was she formal like Eija, saying "Mother" or "Haha"? Or was she more casual like Deimosu, or just outright loose like Naiki?

Somewhere, someone was trying to imagine their little girl still calling them and chatting with them.

"Okay, do I pack the glasses with the..." and there was a sound of breaking glass, lots of breaking glass. "Uhhh...okay, we're not packing the glasses...I'll get the broom."

The sound was a relief and she moved toward the door in order to let Mr. Harker in. Before they left, she had to arrange handing over information on the safe houses that Psyche was too polite to ask about.

Deployment

The wind ripped through the air between the close peaks and trees, carrying with it swirling snow that settled out over the wide, comparatively flat space hidden between the mountains. An old jeep trail wound through the rolling, uneven ground coming to a circular space cleared by at least somewhat frequent use, though it looked as if nothing had been through the area for at least a week, maybe two. A skiff of snow was starting to cover it but the storm hadn't been running long enough yet to lay down the winter's first covering of snow.

Silence reigned, aside from that slight, constant sound of the fast moving air, whistling quietly as it twisted about the stone edges of the mountains at the edges of the area, or down over the cliffs descending down toward the foothills of the Himalaya Mountains. That accompaniment rose and fell in intermediate bursts as the gusts shifted about and fluctuated from one point to another such that the center of the sound moved from one place to another.

And then the violent serenity was broken by an odd twisting sound piercing through the sky above. The source of the newest sound was obscured in the air by the darkness of the night. Then something large and dark landed with a solid metallic crunch into the snow beside the jeep trail.

The object's lower form bent with the impact as one piece of it, something like a leg, moved forward and then an arm leaned down to place a huge hand down to the ground to finish steadying the figure's landing, a massive expanse of nylon billowed outward, cables snapping free so that the huge parachute was left free to whip out into the air for moments before the mechanical figure stood up with an almost noiseless stretch of artificial musculature, snatched the parachute and started balling it up in front before a small electrical fire consumed the parachute, turning it to ash.

Two more such mecha came down behind the first and reproduced the same sequence of events.

"Dunadan 6 reporting, on target here, landing on target, Dunadan 4," a young voice with an Eastern European accent spoke calmly over the radio.

"Good," a woman's voice, apparently Dunadan 4, responded. She spoke with a primarily Californian accent that seemed to have a trace of an

inherited accent underneath that. “You and I set up beacons; we’re two hours from rendezvous. Dunadan 5, take watch. We’re going to be inside the third ring of *Melian’s* girdle so we’re going to have to wait ten minutes when we trigger the beacons for them to do the math on calling us back.”

“Keep watch?” a third voice spoke doubtfully, betraying a faint Irish brogue. “From here? Who would choose this place to meet? A blind, deaf mute throwing darts at a board?”

“You’d rather have dropped in over the chasm?” Dunadan 4 noted dryly. “Or maybe out over some plateau that isn’t a hole in the international satellite coverage so that we can see ourselves on YouTube by the time we get back with a thousand conspiracy theories about time travel or aliens or flipping gods and demons or something?”

“No, Ma’am,” Dunadan 5 responded glumly as he piloted his mecha into position behind an outcropping of rock. “Activating predaflage.”

“Just an official reminder,” Dunadan 4 noted. “The official name of the optical cloak is not ‘predaflage’. Official reminder of not official name given, so let’s get on with this.”

The image of the Irishman’s machine wavered and faded into a near match for the rock face it leaned against, only flickering here and there as snow touched onto the machine before melting on contact with the warmth of the cloak. With the light snow fall and cover the rock provided as a windbreak, the flaw in the camouflage was tactically unimportant.

The framework of the silent Dunadan 6’s fifteen foot tall metallic humanoid figure went calmly about the task assigned to him. The first step was to remove the attachment that would normally be a short-range missile launcher and start distributing the four beacons he had been equipped with. Dunadan 4 was quickly doing the same and between the two of them, they sectioned off a large circular area.

“I’ve got movement,” Dunadan 5 said calmly. “A jeep just turned about a trail higher up, caught sight just through a break in the cli... oh bloody hell.”

“What’s the problem, D5?” the woman heading the small unit asked.

“Our spook has a tail,” he said quickly. “Troop truck, looks like heavy infantry, moving slow.”

Dunadan 6 thought that only made sense, the jeep could take turns that a troop truck simply couldn’t.

“Tank,” D5 said with a frustrated curse.

“Damn, a spider tank takes a little bit more killing than a truck carrying infantry,” Dunadan 4 muttered.

“Not a spider tank,” D5 responded. “I’m seeing what looks like a fully operational Y-41 up here.”

“You’re shitting me,” Dunadan 4 said.

"I shit you not, they have a fucking Ogre," the hidden mecha said. "Who the hell puts a main battle tank up in the Himalayas?"

"Apparently the Empire of Myanmar," Dunadan 4 said irritably. "How far are they?"

"Hard to tell," D5 noted. "They're about two miles out from here, but that's going over what looks to be two chasms and the mountain ahead of us. Not going to be long."

"Damn it," she muttered. "Okay, I'm getting into ambush position. Dunadan 6, see what you can do about slowing down that tank."

"Understood, Dunadan 4," the third pilot's voice intoned calmly. "I shall be out of intercom range while I handle this issue."

"I'm aware of that D6, keep radio silence except in case of eminent failure of mission," the woman noted. "Minimal risk, I repeat, minimal risk. We're piloting Thestrels, stripped down Thestrels at that. We're not in fully geared Errants."

"Understood, Dunadan 6 out," the third pilot noted.

Her own mecha walked up the jeep trail higher up into the mountains looking for a good place to fade into the background and get ready to meet their opponents. If the shift didn't take so long, there wouldn't have been the need for much concern, but ten minutes was too long a time to be still in an open place while an MBT was working its way to them.

With that, Dunadan 6 directed his Thestrel into a straight run toward the edge of the cliff. As his unit lead had said, much of the normal armor and armament for the already light Thestrel had been taken down in favor of a lighter frame for the aerial drop they'd had following the shift. But they were still equipped with the normal jump jets placed on the small machine.

He'd familiarized himself with the Rowling Industries Model 5 when they'd first acquired four of the machines and had taken some time to hypothesize a few variants on the normal settings for the machine and its OS.

The jump jets flashed open with a quiet burst of heated air and a muted blue glow as he carried himself across one chasm toward the cliff face that separated them from their contact and his pursuers. His face remained calm within the cockpit as he came down onto the wide stretch of land. Two steps and he was directing his momentum away from a full on impact with the rock wall, and took a couple more steps before firing the jump jets again carrying him to the top of the cliff face and a gentle landing atop.

"Bloody hell," Dunadan 5 noted. "How the hell does he pull that crap off?"

Dunadan 6 piloted his Thestrel into slow walk both to listen for signs of structural strain and give the engine and jets a chance to cool off. As expected, there was no sound of significant damage to the vehicle, nor did the onboard computer register any significant damage. As ordered, there had been no real risk.

The predaflage was activated as he slowed down; doing what it could to keep up with the forward motion of the machine and the occasional flurry of snow that threatened its purpose. The snow at least half melted around the machine's footsteps, making small puddles of water that quickly froze over into ice once the cloaked Thestrel had passed.

His computer gave him a line towards the curving mountain road his targets would be taking and he lowered his machine's profile, but he still didn't reach for the limited armament they'd been sent with: a mecha knife and a small external cannon.

The cannon was a standard external armament for reconnaissance squads and had the appearance of a large caliber handgun sized for a giant. The shells in the clips were anti-personnel primarily. Used well, they would incapacitate most light vehicles. But it was practically a bunch of stones for a fully armored tank.

However, the tank was not operating in its ideal environment. Its movement was limited to the flat areas in the jagged mountains. Maneuvering for that tank was just a word. It might as well have been a bunker if it weren't for the fact that it was mobile. Putting it up here was just an idiot's ploy. Some Burmese general apparently thought he was Hannibal driving elephants over the Alps.

Dunadan 6 came to a ledge overlooking the road again as his computer's tracking cut through the lightly swirling snow to pick out the Burmese Ogre slowing down slightly and turning its turret to face across the wide drop off the cliff face. It only took a moment's analysis to realize that the tank was aiming at another portion of the jeep trail and expecting to have their rendezvous in sight for an attack fairly soon.

The pilot ran over his options. He could potentially pelt the tank from where he stood with the anti-personnel weapon. That would attract attention and possibly slow down the vehicle, but it would simply be able to fire on both his position and the portion of the trail it was now aiming at. There wasn't anything he could practically do from his current position. So he had to change positions.

Getting a reading on the distances involved, feeling somewhat gratified that he was now jumping down rather than up or even across, he checked his operating settings a second time. Then he was flying through the air again, deactivating the cloak just prior to leaving the ground.

"What the-?" one of the soldiers in the tank said, clearly confused by the warning his computer was giving him. "Sir, we just had something show up on radar."

"Probably a piece of falling debris," the tank commander noted. "Focus on the path, be ready to stop that thief in his tracks, and don't worry about breaking anything, everything is repla...."

A large impact carried through the crew compartment with a subdued clanging sound. The sound proofing, armor and shock absorbers kept most of the impact from affecting the three man crew, but they exchanged nervous looks anyway, before the commander started rotating one of the cameras outside to see what had just hit his tank. Elements of the metallic form of the Thestrel filled the screen within moments and they identified what had appeared.

“Upright!” the commander shouted, “Drive!”

The driver nodded furiously and pushed the tank up to speed down the trail, hoping the sudden motion would throw off their attacker. Meanwhile the gunner was swiveling the turret around and looking for any of the top mounted weapons in position to fire on their unwanted rider.

“The target is in view!” the commander shouted. “Fire now!”

Cursing, but not saying anything against his commander with regards to the mecha currently on top of them, the gunner twisted the turret around and took a snap shot across the gulfs towards the jeep on the other end. He did not get a chance to see if he hit it as he immediately turned his attention back to the mecha and trying to remove it.

Dunadan 6 frowned slightly as heavy machine gun rounds tore into his Thestrel, registering damage on the computer. However, it was the plume of smoke and the imagined sound of impact from further on in the mountains that upset him as he brought his mecha’s knife back up from slicing one of the tanks treads clean through.

The driver, not realizing that one of his treads was damaged, had pushed himself, with all the enemy shaking acceleration he could get out of the massive tank. Surprise covered his features as, instead of moving straight, the tank turned sharply toward the edge of the cliff face. His brain locked in panic and he barely pulled the tank to a stop before passing the fulcrum point that would have given the vehicle over to gravity completely.

“Damn it! What the hell is going on?” the commander shouted.

And then Dunadan 6 stepped up onto the tank’s body, adding his own weight to the protruding end of the vehicle, slamming his knife into the muzzle of the turret. The heavy machine guns had stopped firing for the moment as the gunner panicked and held still as their vehicle teetered over the edge of the cliff, their one working tread more than half out into the air.

The Thestrel was probably less than a third the weight of the tank, but that amount was more than enough to make all three men in the tank nervous as the mecha swung out onto the turret muzzle. Slowly, ever so slowly, the tank started to teeter over the edge.

“That pilot is insane!!”



“That pilot is insane!” the commander said in shock. “Abandon tank!” Frozen stares of fear broke as all three started rushing to remove themselves from their safety harness and reach for the hatches.

Outside, the Thestrel kicked its feet out, launched a burst of jet blast horizontally to send it in a flip around the turret. It cut off almost immediately but had already imparted the momentum and, using the cannon as pull-up bar, sent the Thestrel up into the air, with its head downwards. Below him only the gunner managed to get out and clear of the Ogre as it toppled down into the chasm that stretched past the range of human sight beyond.

Another half-second burst of the jump jet twisted the Thestrel back to upright posture and then a gentler, slower burn brought it to a safe landing on the path, or it would have had one of the two jump jets not sparked out of operation with a burst of electric light just feet above the ground. The result was a semi stumble which its pilot countered by directing it into a run down the path, catching his balance easily, leaving the shocked and startled gunner behind to catch his breath.

Then he was running down the trail in a hurry to catch up with the troop transport before they reached their contact. He reached for the radio and broke communications silence, taking the risk of being picked up by local forces. Most likely, someone else had already been contacted as it was.

“Dunadan 6 breaking radio silence,” he said. “The Ogre is no longer an issue. However, the target’s vehicle appears to have been disabled. I am currently attempting to intercept the transport from behind.”

There was no response beyond a burst of static that gave him the simple knowledge that his message had been received. And then all he had to focus on was the run along the path, trying to catch up to the truck. His computer system was giving him a running read out on the damage that the brief scattering of gunfire had done other than obliterate his optical cloak over large portions of the mecha.

The shorted jump jet was as a result of received weapons damage, and he was apparently losing some hydraulic pressure in the same leg, but there should be enough pressure remaining to return to the rendezvous site for *Melian* to call them back in.

He turned a corner and found himself behind the large transport truck coming to a stop and getting ready to disgorge its passengers to head for the site of the crashed jeep. Drawing his “pistol”, Dunadan 6 aimed for the vehicle, catching sight of the surprised faces just now noticing his approach. In the next moment he fired and a shower of steel ripped outward through the massed troops and the truck they came in on. A piece of shrapnel sparked off another bit of metal and spilled gasoline erupted into a small fireball as the mecha ran on past the new debris.

He came to a stop over the wrecked jeep, its front-end torn into an unrecognizable mass of twisted and charred metal by the rail projectile that

the tank had sent through it. Smoke was still billowing out of the wreck as the pilot set his mecha to scanning the area for signs of life.

"This is Dunadan 4, we have a visual on your position and are taking defensive measures," the woman's voice informed him. "Check for survivors and our cargo and take them on, we'll cover you. We're approaching from the opposite direction now."

"Understood," was the response as he found human heat signatures through the smoke and set his Thestrel to kneel down and popped the chest open so he could exit.

Dunadan 6 was a young man, not even out of his teen years. He could have been sixteen or eighteen; it was hard to tell though his quiet, emotionless demeanor seemed to make most people lean toward the upper end of the possible age range he fit in. A scar twisted up over his left eye in a partial circle underneath short, dark hair. He was wearing a black crash-suit that looked like something out of a sci-fi movie as he pulled a sidearm and moved carefully toward the wreckage. Dunadan 4 and 5 moved past him like flickering swirls of snow that would have given many onlookers a belief in the legends of the yeti.

The driver of the jeep was dead, his head completely destroyed by twisting metal that had ripped off from the impact. Dunadan 6 assumed that that was their contact and grimaced just enough to put an expression on his face, and then it faded away. One of the back seats of the wreck had been pushed open, however, and someone had climbed down out of the toppled vehicle, pulling something along with them.

Glancing over his shoulder to make sure that he was covered, Damir put his sidearm away and moved around the outer portion of wreck until he found a wiry girl not even in her teens trying to carry away a wooden box that was just short of a crate in comparison to her. She kept dropping it into the snow and falling herself. At least until she saw Dunadan 6 approaching her quietly.

Instantly, her eyes flashed red and the pilot dived forward into a roll that came up behind her and out of her line of sight. Behind him, bright flames rose up as seemingly the snow and even the air itself seemed to burst into freestanding flame. He rose up behind the startled girl and firmly wrapped his arms about her to force her head to continue looking forward, but doing as much as he could to not hurt her.

"Calm down," he said firmly. "We're not here to hurt you."

"Are you from the facility?" she asked in something of a panic.

Standing behind her, he could see the small, stylized sun tattooed between her shoulder blades, followed by a sequence of two numbers a dash and a third number.

"No," the pilot said as the weary girl fainted.

He held her as she fell back into his arms and then carefully repositioned her so that she didn't get in the way as he carried her toward his mecha at a quick pace.

"Dunadan 4 this is Dunadan 6. We have a problem," he explained. "The contact is dead and I have a civilian manipulative as well as the cargo."

"Get them into your Thestrel and get moving," Dunadan 4 said. "Radio chatter indicates people are starting to realize something's happening and we are not equipped for what they'll send after losing an Ogre."

"Understood, Dunadan 4," the pilot said before turning back to the girl and strapping her into the built-in stretcher the cockpit contained for the purpose of serving as an emergency transport for a wounded comrade. Though in this case, he added a blindfold torn from the flame retardant blanket in the survival kit.

Then it was just one more trip for the crate and he was ready to move on.

As soon as Dunadan 6 was underway, Dunadan 4 moved on out ahead while Dunadan 5 continued to hold the rear.

"A manipulative," D5 said. "There wasn't anything in the briefing about any akiras, what's this one do?"

"Firestarter," Dunadan 6 said clearly and without any concern.

"Bloody hell..." the other male pilot responded.

"She is blindfolded for now and apparently fainted from either internal injuries or exertion."

"Keep her safe for a little bit longer and we're home," Dunadan 4 said. "Then the Captain can see about her. Get in the circle, I'm activating beacons now."

"Okay, radio chatter says that every Burmese base within a hundred miles of here is sending something out," Dunadan 5 said.

"So, something like two bases," Dunadan 4 said, holding her anti-personnel cannon carefully as they waited for the ten minutes to pass, unable to tell if *Melian* had started the shift or not.

"I think they have copters in the air," D5 noted.

"Those will be fifteen minutes out at least," Dunadan 6 noted. "It is not an issue."

"Movement on the path," Dunadan 4 said. "Two more truck transports."

That was something more of an issue.

The missile-like beacons around them were blinking at a steady pace with a simple yellow light near the top of their structure. However, it was starting to turn greener as time passed. *Melian* was receiving active information updates apparently.

"We might have an issue if a fire fight starts," Dunadan 6 noted. "The shift will bring projectiles in flight as well."

"I'm aware of that, D6," Dunadan 4 noted. "Dunadan 5, you got those charges placed?"

"They're ready," the other pilot noted. "And they're active. First truck through that pass is getting a surprise."

"That should buy us some time," Dunadan 4 said. "Hurry up, Meli..."

And the world about them vanished in a swirl of liquid blue light before being replaced with the inside of a large metal room more than fifty feet tall with a long line of other mecha, mostly larger than the Thestreles, were secured against the sides.

"...an...and we're home," she shook her head in the cockpit. "*Melian*, this is Sergeant Major Desai reporting. The intelligence operative was killed before contact. We have with us a civilian manipulative in uncertain state of health and what we believe to be the cargo that was to be taken back."

"Understood, Sergeant Major, medical and security is being dispatched," an older man's voice informed her through her radio. "Is the manipulative's talent identified?"

"Firestarter," Dunadan 4 reported. "Emotional and medical state unknown she fainted or fell unconscious. Care should be taken."

"Indeed, an akira event would be unappreciated onboard," the officer on the other end noted with a trace of dark humor. "Please stand down and prepare for debriefing. Captain Trolleti instructs that Lieutenant Commander Sarkis will speak to you shortly in briefing room seven. Welcome home."

A few minutes later, after the firestarter was handed over to the medical team, the three pilots were walking through the hallway heading for the briefing room.

Beside Dunadan 6 was a woman of Indian features who was just a hair or two shorter than he was. With the piloting suit set aside, the woman's arms and shoulders were clearly discernible as something belonging to someone who spent much of her life engaged in physical activity. She most clearly did not seem to be one of the slender, "proper" women many Westerners associated with Indian culture, or Asian women in general. Though there were several who had commented out of her hearing that she'd probably look just about killer in an evening gown.

Behind her and on the other side was another man somewhat broader in the shoulder than his team members with reddish brown hair and a cover-model face that had just the right amount of stubble for the fashions of the day. His hair was a bit longer than either the woman's or the teenaged mercenary and somewhat better prepared to look at.

The quiet fuming of the woman gave the youngest of the three plenty of indication that she was not terribly amused by his actions earlier. At some point, he decided, he was probably going to have to figure out exactly what the term "minimal risk" entailed, since that was the issue that Sergeant Major Desai most frequently noted as him not attending to.