

MEIYO

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The samurai stood in the field of battle, his katana gripped in his right fist and hanging down, angled toward the grass.

The clip-clop of horse-hooves was barely audible at first, building to a crescendo as the four bandits rode toward him. The bandits shouted inarticulately, snarls of rage at this one man who dared to oppose them.

As they came within a few feet of the samurai, the bandits pulled up their reins. The steady beat of the horse-hooves became a rapid-fire staccato as the mounts came to a halt, their breaths coming in snorts.

The samurai did not move, did not look up at the bandits, but continued to stare ahead. The katana remained in its downward slant.

For a moment there was silence, broken only by the snorting of the horses. Then one of the bandits demanded to know what his business was here.

Still, the samurai neither moved nor spoke.

Again, the bandits demanded to know why he came to this place. As if their regular pillaging of the village wasn't common knowledge. As if they could get away with coming here each year and stealing crops. As if their crippling of the town's ability to pay their taxes to the shogun would go unnoticed by Edo.

With a kick, the lead bandit started his horse toward the samurai, screaming at him that he would die.

At that, the samurai almost reacted with shock. Were these fools so base as to believe that death was any kind of threat? He lived his life by the code of bushido, fully prepared to die in service of his master. The reality of death was always with him, a robe he wore at all times. One did not live by the sword unless one expected to some day die by it.

The horse rode closer. Still, the samurai did not move, the katana still hanging down.

Raising his sword, the bandit cried as he came upon the samurai.

Even as the bandit's sword started its downward slash, the samurai's katana finally moved, slicing upward through the air and into the bandit's chest, continuing through his neck, sawing through

the clavicle. Blood flew everywhere as the bandit screamed in pain and fell to the ground. The horse galloped onward even as its rider fell earthward, his death mere minutes away. Ignoring him, the samurai moved into a ready stance.

For several seconds, the remaining bandits sat atop their horses, dumbfounded. From what the samurai had been told, these bandits had been together for many years. No doubt they believed themselves to be invincible, immortal.

The samurai intended to prove them wrong on both counts.

Recovering, the three bandits rode as one toward the samurai, bellowing of revenge and destruction.

Again, the samurai did not move until it was required. When the second bandit—whose horse galloped at a greater rate than that of his fellows—was upon him, the samurai sliced off his leg at the thigh, the katana easily carving through meat and muscle and bone. His katana had been forged by a master sword crafter, and few were deemed worthy to carry one of his works of art. Fewer still had the skill to use them properly.

Even as the second bandit fell to the ground, screaming in agony as blood poured from the stump that his right leg had become, the samurai whirled around and struck at the third bandit. This one managed to parry, but his blade was not forged by a master sword crafter—the katana sliced through it as easily as rice paper, the sound of metal shattering metal echoing off the trees.

While the third bandit stared dumbly at the remains of his weapon, the samurai turned to parry a strike by the fourth. Rotating his wrist around, his katana slid across the fourth bandit's blade and shoved it downward, forcing him to drop it. The samurai then thrust the katana into the fourth bandit's chest.

Turning, he saw that the third bandit had decided to turn and flee, rather than face the battle unarmed. The samurai was torn. On the one hand, the bandit was a coward, fleeing in the middle of a fight like that. On the other hand, he had shown his true face, for these bandits had already proven themselves to be cowards many times over. He was only being true to his nature.

Bending down, the samurai picked up the hilt of the third bandit's broken sword, abandoned in retreat. Rearing back his right arm, the samurai threw the hilt with all his might at the third bandit.

The edge of the broken blade penetrated the back of the bandit's neck. He slumped forward, even as the horse continued onward.

Looking around, the samurai nodded his approval. The first and fourth bandits were dead at his feet, and the second would be before long. His work was done.

He turned and started walking back toward the town. No doubt the villagers would offer him gifts, or at least a meal, but he would not accept. He was, after all, only doing his duty to the shogun, and to accept any recompense was unseemly and dishonorable. It was a long trip back to Edo, and he had a report to make.

As he strode, he thought he heard a strange voice in the back of his head saying something in a foreign tongue. "Another victory for Vision of Judgment over his enemies. This is Mariko Guardado, live from Silesia's Coliseum in Solaris City, wishing you good night."

Silesia Coliseum
Solaris City
Solaris VII
12 February 3071

The Word of Blake soldier in the booth with Mariko Guardado had a crew cut, broad shoulders, and no discernible neck. He also carried a huge gun, the size of which made Mariko wonder what he was compensating for.

The soldier, who carried the rank of acolyte, also had an expression on his face indicating that he wouldn't hesitate to use the gun if Mariko didn't do exactly what Word of Blake wanted.

Not that there was any doubt that she would. Mariko had seen what happened to people who went against Word of Blake. Mariko had announced several of their deaths.

Two more of them had just died, blown to smithereens by the man in the white *Vanquisher* called Vision of Judgment, with another two on their way out. Better still, it was all being filmed live and packaged for HPG distribution, to be sent out to anyone in the Inner Sphere who wanted to watch a massacre.

This isn't what I signed on for, she thought, even as she said, "Vision of Judgment's laser makes short work of Oliver's chest armor. Looks like Oliver won't live to regret that laser attack on Vision's flank. And now Branmet has turned and is running away."

Mariko spoke for the benefit of the audio receptors in the booth that transmitted her vocal commentary along with the visuals of the fight. She had no idea what the names that had been assigned to Vision of Judgment's foes were in reference to. They were four battered *Ti Ts'ang* 'Mechs with reduced weaponry, probably not even piloted by their original users. They were going up against a single state-of-the-art *Vanquisher*, which some bright lad in Word of Blake's marketing department had named Vision of Judgment to emphasize what was going on in the Coliseum these days.

It sure as hell wasn't a game anymore.

The *Vanquisher* had already blown off Sookdar's shoulder assembly and Bruner's leg, before it took out Oliver, and now it raised its right arm toward Branmet, not even giving chase. "Vision of Judgment is firing its gauss gun." The *Vanquisher's* arm cannon blew a round into the *Ti Ts'ang's* back. "Branmet has also fallen."

Mariko could hear cheers that she knew were manufactured by the engineers downstairs. Certainly those noises of joy weren't coming from the desultory faces of the people forced to sit in the seats to give the illusion of a packed house of eager fans. The lighting was arranged in such a way that no one could see their faces anyway, just register that they were there and assume that the cheers came from them rather than a recording.

"The final tally," Mariko said, trying to sound excited, "is four kills. Another victory for Vision of Judgment over his enemies. This is Mariko Guardado, live from Silesia's Coliseum in Solaris City, wishing you good night."

There was a time when she did this alongside a color commentator, a former 'MechWarrior named Patricia Bracken. Nerve damage during a campaign against some mercs about ten years back left her incapable of running a 'Mech anymore, so she took a job on Solaris City, providing insight into the workings of the 'Mechs for the games.

It had been an excellent arrangement. Patricia wasn't the most charismatic person in the Inner Sphere, but she knew her stuff, and she and Mariko had developed a rapport over the past few years, with Mariko knowing just what questions to ask to get the best and most informative answers out of Patricia. Visually, they were a nice contrast as well. Mariko was beautiful; modesty didn't prevent her from thinking that, as she'd paid good money for her looks. Genetics helped, of course: she was born with soft Asian eyes and lovely olive skin. But the lustrous black hair, with just enough curl, the button nose, the warm lips, the enticing cleavage—all those had been bought and paid for. Patricia, though, didn't bother with any of that. A middle-aged veteran of more combat than Mariko could imagine, her face looked like it was made of leather, her steel-gray hair like it was made of wirebrush, her ice-blue eyes surrounded by bags. Her face was full of the very same lines Mariko had paid to remove, but for Patricia, they added character, showed that she knew what she was talking about when she described why a 'Mech Warrior did this or that in the ring.

Within a year of their being paired up, Mariko and Patricia's voices and faces were known all over the Inner Sphere. True, they weren't on the same level as Julian Nero—no one was—but they had a following. Between gaming seasons, they often did tours together, as well as speaking engagements, interviews, and more. Patricia had even hired a writer to ghost her life story, and it had the second-highest read rate of any book downloaded out of

Solaris. (The top spot, of course, was taken by Nero's wretched, fact-free autobiography, *Circling the Ring*.)

Then the Word of Blake took over.

For a time, the Coliseum was shut down. But soon the Word of Blake, communications experts that they were, realized the value of good propaganda, and in turning Solaris's best export—the games—against them. What once were contests of skill now became executions, thinly disguised as the same old competitions.

At first they had been one-sided, several white *Vanquishers* fighting against some hapless gladiator who'd been captured in the fighting. Then, suddenly, things changed. The Vision of Judgment showed up, and instead of four Word of Blake 'Mechs against one, it was the other way around.

Not that the results ever changed. The white 'Mechs always won, the other 'Mechs always lost—violently.

Mariko had no idea who was in the Vision of Judgment 'Mech. She didn't much care, either. If nothing else, whoever it was made for better trivid. Beating the odds was always more fun to watch than a foregone conclusion. Not that it wasn't foregone in any event, but at least the one-on-four numbers created the illusion.

And as went the propaganda war, so went the physical one. Word of Blake had won a decisive upset victory near the city of Nowhere, where they had defeated a lance lead by the legendary *Shihan* Giuseppe Kishi. Probably the most storied Combine MechWarrior on Solaris since the death of Theodore Gross, he was so well regarded that he was given the title of *shihan*—Japanese for “master”—rather than a military rank. He had won many victories against the Word of Blake—until Nowhere, where he lost and was officially listed as missing and presumed KIA.

Mariko had interviewed Kishi a few times in the past, before she got the Silesia gig, and he had always been taciturn and self-effacing. She had always admired that quality, and had been devastated to learn of his defeat.

With the “game” ended, Mariko got up from her seat. The Word of Blake soldier pushed the button to open the door to the booth.

This acolyte wasn't her only escort—she had three, each of whom took an eight-hour shift. She had started thinking of them as Tail, Pail, and Mail, after a comedy trio that had been popular when she was a girl. This one was Mail, who distinguished himself by

having gray in the stubble of his crew cut. Tail had unusually wide brown eyes, and Pail was the only one who was dark-skinned.

Usually, after a game, she and Patricia would chat with the engineering staff for a bit, then go out to a tavern for drinks and a late dinner, sometimes chatting up their fans, sometimes sitting alone in their corner booth just talking about life. Sometimes they'd go back to either her place or Patricia's, though that had lessened the last year or so, as Patricia was feeling more experimental than Mariko was willing to be in bed.

When Word of Blake took over, though, Patricia had disappeared. To this day, Mariko had no idea if she was dead or alive. Dead seemed more likely: Solaris had a lot more corpses these days than ever before.

The tavern Mariko and Patricia used to frequent had been destroyed in the fighting—ironically, by a Combine 'Mech—and fraternization among the trivid staff was no longer permitted, so she went straight home, escorted by Mail. Her fame had given her a few perks, though Mariko hardly considered them such, including permission to keep her spacious apartment. Of course, Mail stayed posted outside the door at all times, to be relieved later by Pail and then Tail. They never came inside—another perk, a modicum of privacy—but she wasn't aloud to walk around outside unescorted by one of the three.

At no point during the ride from the coliseum to her apartment did Mail speak. Mariko had never heard him or either of his comrades speak. They all grunted a lot, and gave instructions by gesturing. Mariko didn't want to think about what would happen if she misinterpreted a gesture.

Probably something involving the big gun.

Mariko kicked off her shoes as she entered her place, wandered into the kitchen, pulled a meal out of the cooler and tossed it into the oven. The boxed meals all tasted like steamed mush, regardless of what it looked like—this particular one claimed to be teriyaki steak with mushrooms and roasted potatoes—but all food tasted like that to Mariko these days, so she didn't see the point in spending money on *good* food.

I wish Patricia had taken her with me. She snorted at that. Right, like she'd be willing to be dragged down by me. Face it, she's a former soldier. She's trained for shit like this. Me? The only thing I'm trained in is how not to pop my P's. I'd be dead in an hour.

Plus, of course, there was the very real possibility that Patricia was also dead.

That would probably be an improvement, she thought sadly as the cooker beeped. She took it out, sighed, and started shoveling the theoretical steak into her mouth, not even bothering to sit down at the table. She just wanted to eat and go to bed. And take a dream suppressant first—it was the only way to get through the night anymore...

The samurai sat in wait.

The shogun had been fulsome with praise for his work against the bandits. Fulsome for the shogun, in any case—the leader of all Nippon was not one to gush. But he did allow as how the samurai had performed his duties with honor and with success, and that he remained worthy of his title.

The samurai was pleased with his lord's praise.

Now he waited in his home, the paper doors closed, kneeling in sei-za position on the tatami mat. He was in a meditative trance.

He came out of the trance when he heard the front door slide open. The samurai was not expecting visitors. His katana lay sheathed at his side; his right hand moved toward the top of the scabbard, his thumb resting on the end of the hilt, prepared to flick the sword out at a moment's notice.

When the door slid open to reveal a young man also kneeling in sei-za, the samurai removed his hand from the katana. This was the shogun's messenger. He carried the shogun's seal, but the samurai did not require it—he knew the boy by sight.

"Forgive my intrusion," the messenger said, "but I bring news from our lord, the shogun."

"Enter and deliver your message," the samurai said, his fists resting on his thighs.

The messenger rose, slid the door shut, and then knelt before the samurai. "The shogun has another task for you, my lord."

"I live to serve our lord, the shogun. Speak, and tell me his wishes."

In measured tones, the messenger spelled out for the samurai what his next task was to be. The enemies to be killed, the honor to be gained.

Nodding, the samurai said, "I hear the message, and I obey. Do you require refreshment before your journey back to the shogun's palace?"

Shaking his head, the messenger bowed and said, as he always did, "No, my lord. I must return forthwith." With that, he rose to his feet, went to the door, knelt, opened the door, went to the other side, knelt again, closed it, then took his leave.

The samurai returned to his meditation. It would be a long journey tomorrow, and he needed to be of clear mind.

Kobe District
Solaris City
Solaris VII
13 February 3071

The next morning, after Mariko had slept past noon and tossed her breakfast mealbox into the oven—this claimed to be fish, muffins, and sopresatta rolls—she heard a sound she'd never heard before: her guard's voice.

Checking the clock on the oven, she saw that it was one o'clock, which was a shift change. Her guard—it would've been Pail being relieved by Tail—was yelling at someone.

Curious as to what was going on—this was the most active any of her escorts had been—she went to the front door, ignoring the beeping of the cooker indicating that her breakfast was ready.

The door slid open to reveal an acolyte she didn't recognize. This one was female, stocky, with thick dark hair, several scars on her heavily lined face, green eyes, and a large nose. She carried a gun that was even bigger than the one Mail carried. (Pail and Tail had smaller weapons, which had led to Mariko's presumptions about Mail's need to compensate.) She was arguing with Pail.

"I'm just going where I'm told, Acolyte."

Pail whirled around, his dark skin flush with anger. "Inside," he snarled at her, which were the first two coherent syllables he'd ever uttered in her direction.

"What's going on?"

To Mariko, the new acolyte said, "This isn't your concern, ma'am." Then to Pail she said, "I got my orders, Acolyte. You wanna see 'em, knock yourself out." She reached into one of the many pouches that Word of Blake uniforms came equipped with and pulled out a small reader.

Snatching it angrily, Pail put his thumb on the side of the reader and then gazed over the words on the display. His face went from anger to disbelief to disappointment and back to anger again, all in about a second-and-a-half. It was a wider range of expression than Mariko had thought the man capable of.

“Fine,” Pail said as he practically shoved the reader back in the woman’s face.

With a calm that was in direct contrast to Pail’s irritation, the acolyte accepted the reader, put it back in the pouch, then stood at attention and saluted. “I relieve you.”

Still slump-shouldered, Pail raised his right hand to his forehead. “I stand relieved,” he said, and walked off.

As soon as Pail disappeared into the lift, the acolyte angrily turned on Mariko and pointed her gun right at her head. “Inside, bitch—*now!*”

Mariko swallowed and slowly backed into her apartment. “What’s goi—?”

“Shut *up!*” The acolyte followed her in, the gun still pointed at her head. As soon as the door slid shut behind the acolyte—both were now standing in her living room—the latter reached into another pouch with her left hand, right hand still aiming the gun at Mariko.

To Mariko’s abject confusion, the device the acolyte now held in her left hand was a white noise generator. Mariko used it on interviews sometimes, to prevent ambient noise and signals from interfering with the conversation. To her horror, she also realized that it could be used to mask the sound of Mariko being killed by the gun in the acolyte’s right hand from the electronic eavesdroppers she knew were present in her rooms.

She activated the generator by pressing a control on it, causing a red light to go on. As soon as it did, she lowered the gun. “It’s okay, M’iko, we can talk.”

Mariko blinked, confused. Why was this soldier calling her by a nickname that had only been used by her parents, her brother, and—

“Patricia?”

Grinning, the acolyte grabbed her nose, and appeared to rip it off—but it was just a prosthetic. She then tore off the “scarring” on her face and removed her black wig to reveal a more familiar buzz-cut. It was, indeed, Patricia Bracken, albeit now with green eyes. Mariko supposed it was part of the disguise.

“Oh my God—Patricia, what—how—why—?” Unable to complete a sentence—or even a thought—she instead leapt forward and grabbed Patricia in a tight hug.

"It's good to see you too, kiddo."

Still clutching Patricia as if for dear life, Mariko asked, "What happened?"

Pulling out of the embrace, Patricia said, "Long story, M'iko, and I'll be happy to tell you in a bit. But first, we got business to discuss. Mind if I sit?"

Mariko spurted out a laugh. "You're the one holding the gun."

"Oh, yeah." She looked down at the weapon as if noticing she was carrying it for the first time. "Sorry 'bout that. Had to stay in character, y'know?"

"What character? What the hell is *going on*, Patricia?"

"If you'd shut the hell up for a second, I'll tell you." She fell more than sat on Mariko's small couch. "I'd kill for a beer. You still keep some Sapporo in the house?"

Mariko nodded and moved toward the kitchen. "I've only got two cans left. The supply lines were cut a month ago, so there hasn't been any new beer." She opened the cooler, ignoring the display on the oven that indicated that her breakfast was done, and pulled out the last two beers. Sapporo was an old Japanese beer that Mariko had introduced Patricia to—it had become the latter's favorite drink, and they often had it together. Mariko hadn't been able to bear the idea of drinking them without even knowing if Patricia was alive or dead.

Taking a seat on the easy chair perpendicular to the couch, Mariko handed Patricia one of the squat silver polymer cans, and pulled open the lid of hers. "So what's going on? Where've you been? Wh—"

Patricia held up a hand. "Hang on." She leaned her head back and took a very long drink of beer. "God, that hits the spot. I haven't had a good beer since the Weebs of Blake showed up." She set her beer down on the coffee table. "Okay, here's the deal. I need you to go to work within the next ten minutes or so."

Mariko frowned, still holding her beer can without drinking from it. "I'm not supposed to be at the studio for another two hours."

"What?" Patricia leaned forward. "But what about the pregame?"

"We don't do that anymore. We don't do *anything* anymore. I show up, I call the plays, I go home. No pregame, no interviews,

no wrapup, nothing. They only still use me because my voice is associated with Silesia's and they want to hew as close as they can to the old games."

"So why don't they do pregame?" Patricia knocked back some more beer. "All right, forget it. We'll come up with another excuse. I might be able to forge new orders on the reader. It's risky, though—Dubazana usually goes straight to the Farsi Club after his shift's over, but he might get all pissed about me replacing Osborne, so he *could* go back to HQ, in which case we're screwed."

Mariko assumed that Dubazana and Osborne were Pail and Tail. "Patricia..."

All of a sudden, Patricia bounded to her feet, the gun swinging around and hitting her in the side. Mariko had never seen her partner like this—in the booth she was always calm and a little snarky, but now she was a bundle of energy, looking ready to use that gun at a moment's notice. *I just hope she doesn't decide to use it on me.*

"We need to get Kishi out."

At that, Mariko almost dropped her beer. "Kishi—*Shihan* Kishi?"

"No, Private Kishi, the guy who cleans the latrines—of *course Shihan* Kishi!"

Mariko set her beer down on the coffee table and stood up. She was half a head taller than Patricia, and she felt the need to take advantage of that. "*Shihan* Kishi's dead."

Patricia blinked. "He was killed? Dammit, I thought his games were all rigged. When did this happen, last night?"

"He died when he lost at Nowhere. Patricia, you're not making any sense, I—"

"I'm not making any sense? M'iko, you see Kishi *every day* from the booth."

"What're you—?" Then, all of a sudden, Mariko realized what Patricia was talking about. "Oh my God. Vision of Judgment—that's Kishi?"

"You didn't know?"

Throwing up her hands, Mariko said, "Of *course* I didn't know, they don't tell me a damn thing. I told you, I show up, I call—"

“—the plays, you go home, right. Shit.” Patricia took a breath. “Well, Vision of Judgment is Kishi, and my job is to get him out—it’ll be a shot in the arm to the Combine—and everyone else, too, I don’t doubt—and it’ll kick the Blakists’ propaganda right in the balls.”

Mariko said, “Let me guess—you escort me to work and then sneak down to the barracks and get him out?”

“Bingo.”

“That’s insane.”

Now it was Patricia’s turn to shrug. “Desperate times, and all that. Look, you’re in the clear. It’s ‘Acolyte Yanotti’ who’ll take the heat.”

“That’s the ID you borrowed?” Mariko asked, to which Patricia nodded. “And you got that *where*, exactly?”

“From some people who want Kishi out, and know I’m the one to do it. I know my way around Silesia’s, I’ve got combat experience, and the Blakists haven’t captured me yet. Plus, I got an in with you.”

Mariko grabbed her beer and gulped the rest of it down. “I haven’t said yes yet, Patricia.”

Grinning, she said, “*Cah-mon*, M’iko, how can you say no? This is a chance to reverse the biggest setback the we’ve suffered! Not to mention getting in good with—with Kurita.”

Having spent far too long choosing her words properly, not to mention over a decade of interviewing people, Mariko knew a hiccup when she heard it. It wasn’t Kurita she would be getting in good with—or at least, not only them. “Who’re you working for, Patricia?”

Looking down, Patricia muttered, “It doesn’t matter.”

“It for damn sure does. You only mutter like that when you’re hiding something. *Talk* to me, Patricia, who’re you working for? Someone had to give you those toys and a way to get rid of my escort.” As she spoke, she saw it. “Shit, you’re in bed with the yakuza.”

“I am *not* in bed with the yakuza!”

“Oh, come *off* it, Patricia.” Mariko stomped into the kitchen. “The yaks are helping the SHDL, too! There’s nobody else on Solaris

with the resources to pull this off who'd have anything to gain by springing Kishi. They'll turn him over to the Combine, and they'll be sitting pretty. Now tell me I'm wrong."

"You're wrong—I'm not 'in bed' with them, I'm just doing a job."

Mariko rolled her eyes. "Right, because mobsters are notorious for practicing the live-and-let-live philosophy."

Patricia walked up to Mariko, slung her gun behind her back, and put her hands on Mariko's shoulders. "I'm telling you, M'iko, it's just a job. They need me, and I need them."

That didn't sound right. "How do you need them?"

"Never mind."

Shrugging off Patricia's arms, Mariko said, "What do you *mean*, never mind—I want to know!"

"It's none'a your business."

"Like hell it isn't! Patricia, we've been partners for years, both in the booth and in the bedroom—what can't you tell me?"

"A lot. And this ain't your concern, all right? Just trust me."

"Trust you. You come in here out of nowhere after no word for *months*, ask me to smuggle you into the stronghold of Word of Blake's propagand machine to sneak out their greatest weapon on behalf of the damned *mob*, and you want me to *trust* you? I don't even want to go along with this! I could get killed!"

Snarling now, Patricia wagged her finger at Mariko. "Don't tell me about getting killed, M'iko. I spent twenty years riding a 'Mech on ten different worlds, I went up against the worst the—"

"—major Houses could throw at me and you're still here, I've heard the speech before, Patricia."

The two women stared at each other for several seconds. Mariko's arms were folded defiantly. The truth was, she wanted more than anything to help Patricia, to rescue *Shihan* Kishi, to feel like she was *doing* something. But she was also pissed at Patricia for just assuming she'd go along with it—that Mariko would follow Patricia's lead. Without any information—no details, no plans.

“I need to do this, M’iko,” Patricia finally said in a tight voice, “and I can’t do it without you. Now will you help me—will you help the cause—or not?”

Mariko chuckled bitterly. *The only cause being served here is the yakuza’s.* She knew that wasn’t entirely true, but it certainly felt that way. She also had one final objection. “What if Kishi doesn’t want to come?”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard you say—and I’ve heard you say some seriously stupid shit, M’iko. He’s a prisoner, why would—”

“He’s Vision of Judgment! I sit there in that damned booth every night and I watch him blow prisoners into scrap metal! What if he’s doing it willingly? What if he’s gone over to the Word?”

“That’s not possible.” Patricia started pacing again. “He’s—he’s *Kishi*, for Christ’s sake. We got intel that he’s been brainwashed, and I’ve got a way to reverse it, if I can get close.”

Mariko sat back down on her chair. “I hope to hell you’re right, Patricia—’cause if he doesn’t want to go, they’re gonna need a DNA scanner to ID the bodies when he’s done with us.”

Eyes widening, Patricia sat on the sofa and stared at Mariko. “You’ll do it?”

Letting out a long sigh, Mariko said, “Yeah. Let’s do it.”

The ronin had been given the option of how the duel was to be settled. Because the ronin was an honorable man once, the samurai granted him choice in the manner of his death.

To the samurai's surprise, the ronin had chosen to fight by hand. The samurai wondered if the ronin knew of the samurai's proficiency at karate. Perhaps the ronin thought his own skills to be equal to the task.

Either way, the samurai needed to prepare. He began by doing several stretching exercises to limber his muscles.

As he did so, he heard his name being called.

Or, rather, not his name. He responded instinctively, even though his name was not Giuseppe. It was—

"Giuseppe! Shihan Kishi, you have to come with me!"

Shihan? That didn't make any sense. The samurai was a senpai, a senior student, of karate, not a master. And what kind of name was Giuseppe?

Then he saw her.

Running only on instinct, the samurai attacked the intruder—who seemed to appear out of nowhere—with a shuto strike to the forehead.

But the intruder blocked the strike with an upper block—one that, oddly, gave the samurai a prick in his hand. "Shihan Kishi, I'm here to rescue you."

Suddenly, the samurai's head started to hurt. His house seemed to melt and change and shift. The ground hardened beneath his feet, and his gi started to grow heavy. And then...

...it all started...

...to come back to him.

My God.

Shihan Giuseppe Kishi sat in an unfamiliar 'Mech, a woman with steel-gray hair wearing a Word of Blake uniform kneeling next to him, leaning near from the 'Mech gantry. The last thing he remembered was being ambushed by Word of Blake near Nowhere—

—before fighting as a samurai in feudal Japan.

It was a fantasy of Giuseppe's, to live in that simpler time, before technology, before space travel, to serve in that earlier era the way he served House Kurita now.

Word of Blake gave that to him—and then they twisted it.

Looking around, he saw that he was in the waiting area where they kept him before he was sent out to kill his fellow gladiators. At the 'Mech's feet were a squad of Blakist infantrymen.

They corrupted his dream. They dishonored him.

For that, they needed to be destroyed.

"Hey," one of the other Word of Blake soldiers shouted, "you ain't supposed to be movin' yet!"

Giuseppe raised the arm of the unfamiliar white 'Mech that they called Vision of Judgment and fired the Gauss gun, ripping the soldier to pieces.

The steel-gray-haired woman spoke with the voice of the intruder. "This way, *Shihan*—we can escape."

"No," Giuseppe said. "We will not run away. Honor must be served."

He activated all the armament in Vision of Judgment. The woman backed away from the 'Mech's cockpit.

Then he walked forward.

* * *

"I was barely able to make it a safe distance before the cessation of fighting inside the Silesia Coliseum, the work of its greatest fighter. Vision of Judgment—or, rather, *Shihan* Giuseppe Kishi of House Kurita—has battered the Coliseum, killing hundreds of

Blakists and Blakist collaborators. I don't know who will see this report, but I, for one, am glad that it will be my last tournament. For the final time, this is Mariko Guardado."

Connor DeLon, *koman* of the yakuza, switched the trivid image of Mariko off.

The real Mariko sat trembling in the corner of the room.

Patricia sighed. She had been hoping M'iko would have been able to handle this better, but she *was* only a civilian, and very few civilians—indeed, very few *people*—got to meet with someone as high-ranking as Connor was in the yakuza.

"You've done well," Connor said.

"I'm sorry we couldn't get the *shihan* out alive."

Shaking his head, Connor said, "It is better this way. He died a hero—he could have hoped for no better end, and no better way to reclaim his honor."

"And y-you have some nice footage," Mariko said hesitantly. "Even have my famous face. Nice job."

With no obvious sincerity, Connor said, "Thank you." He turned to Patricia. "Our business is concluded. You will be paid as agreed."

"There's one change—the passage applies to both of us."

Connor raised an eyebrow. "Our agreement was with you, Sergeant Bracken. Ms. Guardado is not your concern—nor ours."

"She damn well *is* my concern—this only went down the way it did because of her getting me in. Besides—I could use her help."

"And why should this matter to us?"

"Because," Mariko said, the trembling fading from her voice, "I can do you more good as a fugitive than as a corpse. You toss me out on my ear, then Word of Blake finds me, kills me, and turns my death into restitution for Kishi. You let me go with Patricia, I can do more pirate broadcasts—and not that crap that Nero's doing, I mean *real* underground stuff. That'll help your cause."

"How do we know you will have the capability of producing these broadcasts?" Connor asked with a small smile.

M'iko, bless her, gave him the same smile back. "Erik Gray gets on the holo, doesn't he? I've got my methods. Besides, you're already helping Patricia out—what's adding me, in the end?"

"Passage off-planet is difficult." Connor rubbed his chin; Patricia noted that he was missing his pinky finger. "But not impossible. And removing the Vision of Judgment under the cloud of betrayal has indeed been a fine victory for us, one that gives us leverage with others. Your wish is granted."

Patricia breathed a sigh of relief.

Connor turned to Patricia. "If you go to Shostakovich Port in two hours, and meet with a man named Nakamura, he will lead you to your passage." He pressed a button. A door slid open, and the two no-necked thugs who had escorted them into Connor's office walked in. Patricia got the message right off, and after a second, so did M'iko. They followed the two thugs out.

"So," M'iko said, "you gonna tell me what it is the yakuza gave you in return?"

"It's good to see you too, kiddo."

"You're not answering my question, Patricia."

"Very observant."

They said nothing as they left the building. M'iko did not look happy.

Well, tough. We did the job, now we finally get off this dirtball. And we saved the big hero. Not bad for a day's work.