

## Excerpt # 4

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

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### Chapter 95:Whisper in the Night

Hikari “The Whisper” Daisuke showered, put on her nightclothes, and lay down on the bed. Simple flannel pajamas kept her warm, and attempted to coax her to sleep.

Her tired muscles longed for sleep. For days it seemed they had been tensed, ready to move if called upon. Her dark eyes longed for sleep—for a stretch without constant focus.

Her silken hair framed a face that also longed for sleep. Joe told her over and over she could quit this job and become a model if she could unfurrow her brow for the length of the catwalk. Kari often missed the complement embedded in the tease, and often succeeded in denying her undeniable beauty.

She would argue back that her brow was often quite relaxed thank you very much, just not when there was danger.

Now even her face was tired from the danger.

Only her mind wanted to keep going—wanted her on her feet in case...in case what? Her mind had no answer for that, and that troubled her the most.

With a thought she turned on the lights, and looked around. The apartment was as she left it before going to earth. It was nearly identical to Joe’s apartment, but for the pictures and nick-knacks. The apartment hadn’t seen use in years, and plastic covered every piece of furniture but the bed. She could see nothing to concern her, and shut the lights off again. She forced her eyes closed, and tried to will herself to sleep.

## Excerpt # 4

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

By midnight it was obvious that sleep was not in the cards. Her mind would simply not shut down. Beyond the events of the last few days, which demanded their own attention, the return to Bellona-4 was having an unexpected effect on her. It had been five years since she last set foot on this dust ball, but something about the place was taking her back in time. She closed her eyes and tried to blot it out; back in time was not somewhere she wished to go.

She figured she would be able to relax now that Joe had landed. The apartment computer had told her that much. It was late, and he probably expected her to be sleeping. No, she corrected herself: he hoped she was sleeping, but expected her to be up. So why didn't he see her right away? Was he disappointed in her somehow?

Nonsense, she thought. She did everything Joe would have wanted. In the end result she had to leave him to fend for himself. She felt a sense of failure in that. Just like...

Exercise; perhaps if she worked out for a bit, she could exhaust herself enough then she could get some sleep. It shouldn't take much. She hopped out of bed, and put on a heavy robe. She closed her eyes as nanotech raced through the fabric of the robe, and her practice armor was assembled. It was pale white, and weighted a good bit more than her regular armor. Her own armor felt feather light by comparison—which was the point of course. This was optimized to help you develop, while the light armor was optimized for combat.

She opened her eyes; The Whisper was ready for a workout.

She took the lift down to the gym on the fifth floor. On one side of the hall were exercise machines and an Olympic sized pool. On the other, was a huge room used for sports. She entered "the Arena" as Easy called it, and surveyed the scene. The practice mat was out and the bleachers were recessed into the wall. She was surrounded by hardwood on all sides. It was probably one of the most expensive rooms to construct in the building, but the architect had insisted that you couldn't have a gym made of metal and not have serious injuries.

She cupped a small ball from a nearby table. With a thought it stretched and shifted into a sword. It wasn't as strong, as light, or as balanced as her good sword, but God help anyone

## Excerpt # 4

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Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

who crossed her while she wielded it.

She started a routine without thinking, starting from a defensive stance, and performed a full spin into a low strike. As she leaped and spun, her practice blade whistling through the air, she stopped fighting her own thoughts and let them drift where they would.

Six years ago, on Katana-3...

### Chapter 101: Katana-3

The Katana Solar System—so named because “cutting edge” technology would allow it to be conquered—had been colonized by a conglomerate of companies from the Far East and the country that was still then known as the United States. The colonists set out in 2089, in cryogenic sleeper ships.

“Cutting edge” technology has its problems though, and after fifty eight years of traveling between earth and the third planet of the Katana system, seventeen thousand of the thirty thousand settlers were dead on arrival. Their bodies were converted to a tasteless, gritty paste that the remaining colonists used to supplement their food stores until greenhouses could be established.

It was a harsh existence. The planet had its own flora and fauna. Disease ravaged the colonists, and by the time the main living structures, power facilities, and greenhouses were fully constructed, their number had dropped to five thousand.

Pain can do one of two things; kill empathy or cause it to blossom. The people of Katana-3 made their choice, and created a society that lacked any sense of empathy. Instead of sharing the pain of others, they cast suffering aside as unimportant. Death meant more room at the table for the survivors.

## Excerpt # 4

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

For the first thirty years of their existence, they could not feed more than 20 thousand people at a time. Disease and other hazards kept the numbers down at first, but eventually they were faced with a population problem.

It was deemed foolish to restrict procreation, as they needed as varied a gene pool as possible. But they couldn't feed everyone. At first, they executed the excess by random lot. But this seemed to be a waste as well.

So they developed the contest.

It began when the children entered school. All children were trained in the martial arts from the age of five. Children who excelled especially well in certain areas were given a pass from the final contest. All others participated from the age of sixteen through the age of eighteen. Every four months they would fight one of their peers from somewhere on the planet to the death. If you survived the first battle after your eighteenth birthday, you were allowed to continue in Katana society. If you were killed, your killer said these words: "I can not live if you do not die."

Eventually, they got enough scientists together that they were able to tame the environment. They knew what they could eat, what they couldn't, and how to grow things outside the bio-domes. Their immune systems developed to handle the environment. When they re-established contact with earth, they developed inoculations for travelers so that they wouldn't die as soon as they set foot on the planet.

They developed cities, removed the population limit, and began to flourish.

But tradition dies hard; much harder than Katana-3's children.

The rules changed. It was turned into a ladder system with a yearly champion, and the participants were all eighteen. If you were wounded in the lower rounds you could be spared, but in the final confrontation for the championship these words were required to be spoken: "I can not live if you do not die."

## Excerpt # 4

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

### Chapter 102: Then and Now

By her eighteenth birthday, Hikari was one of the planet's most talented warriors. Through round after round Hikari broke legs, arms, ribs, jaws--anything to disable her opponent. Her skill was so far beyond everyone else that she didn't need to kill anyone. Where others needed to land a lucky death blow to the neck or temple, she was able to win submission after submission.

It was the final round she dreaded--not because she might die, but because she was required to kill.

It was a while before she realized that she performing *the* routine; reenacting the final contest in the gym on Bellona-4. The final battle for that year was decreed to be a sword fight. In heavy armor she threw the blocks and attacks, performed the somersaults and rolls, exactly as she had done in silk six years before. Her skills had not faded; they had only increased with training and experience—as did the pain.

In white silken robes she had faced her final opponent. The girl's name was Li Tarawa. She was Hikari's sparing partner, and her best friend--her only friend. In a society where honor meant killing your competitors, there was little room for camaraderie. Li thought it was all insane, and the two became fast friends. They decided to perfect their skill so that they wouldn't have to kill, and it brought them here.

Li stood in black robes. She was taller than Hikari, but shared Hikari's muscular build. They were both athletes of the highest caliber, and this battle was highly anticipated. The whole of the planet watched them on live video, while members of the ruling class sat in attendance. There were even some outsiders in various forms of dress and armor, who had come to watch the proceedings.

On the dais overlooking the match, was the dictator of Katana-3: Shogun Rikuto Hiroto. He wore an elaborate suit of armor that was designed to mimic the style of the original shoguns. What it lacked in authenticity it more than made up for in effectiveness. This Shogun was a

## Excerpt # 4

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

walking tank.

At his side, in a stand, was the sword of leadership—formed from a piece of the sleeper ship hull. It weighed over 30lbs, and the Shogun kept himself fit enough to use it. On either side of him, traditionally, would be the immediate family of the final combatants, but Li was born to very young parents, who died in the contest at eighteen. Only Hikari's parents sat to the left of the Shogun, along with her ten year old brother Akio.

She threw her brother Akio a wink to reassure him. The boy looked anxious and pale. No doubt he feared for his sister. It was cruel to make him watch her fate, but in eight years it would be his own. The standing wisdom was it was better for children to become accustomed to the trial they would face.

*No...don't remove the cruelty...just get everyone used to it early...*

She stared into the eyes of her father, Osamu Daisuke. Tall, strong and imposing, in the teal and white robes of the council—the Shogun's advisors—Osamu shook his head. The white streaks that had begun to take root in his hair would dominate its coloring soon, of that he was certain.

Osamu stood victorious in this very ring twenty-five years ago, having mortally wounded his own childhood friend. As much as Hikari and Li agreed the contest was madness, Osamu and his friend esteemed it. As they fought, they were filled with a sense of destiny and tradition that had driven countless men to their deaths over the centuries of human existence.

His emotions were torn between the love for his daughter and his fury at the way she disrespected their tradition. As Hikari stared into his eyes, she recalled the sharp slap her father delivered to her face when she suggested fleeing the planet instead of facing the fight. She was told she should fear dishonor more than death. Today Hikari was prepared to suffer both.

She shifted her gaze to her mother, Noriko. The years were kind to her, and she looked every bit the part of Hikari's older sister. Only the purple robes and jewelry spoke to her age and

## Excerpt # 4

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

societal rank. Just two years after Osamu's victory, she fell on this very spot—a blow to the temple rendering her unconscious. It was early in the competition, so her life was not required of her. Osamu was in attendance, and marveled at the young woman's durability, as the strike should have killed her. Marriage and children followed, but Noriko always struggled with a sense of failure that she was determined her children would not feel. She had already failed her eldest son, in her own opinion, and she was determined that the trend would not continue with Hikari.

Hikari recalled how her mother had echoed her father's sentiments—slapping the other side of her face when she begged them to help her run. She knew her parents loved her, but somehow they were convinced this tournament was the key to every moment of her future. In fact it was—but in a way none of them could imagine.

Distraught, she looked away from them, looking up to the glass domed ceiling. The stars were out. It was a clear night. She smiled as she thought of her grandmother. Hikari took more than her name from Hikari Shousuke, who had been an outspoken opponent of the old traditions. Her writings and speeches resulted in her exile--and Hikari's eternal admiration.

No matter how deranged her society was, there were always a few who spoke out for the values of the soul. There were always a few who spoke out for love, friendship, and "true honor" as Grandma Hikari called it. To her parents' horror, Hikari adopted the beliefs of her grandmother. Her grandmother was finally exiled for trying to get her brother out of the contest. He didn't fear death; in fact everyone feared his size, strength and skill, all of which was considerable. He too steadfastly refused to kill. Their parents disowned him, and he left the planet with his grandmother.

Li looked into her eyes. "If I am to die, at least it will be by your blade, and not a stranger. I could not ask for more."

"More likely I will die by your blade, Li. I do not see myself as able to kill you."

"You are a sister to me. I do not relish the outcome either way. But now we are out of choices." Li drew her sword from its sheath, and took up a defensive posture. Hikari followed. One thought took all her attention: *There must be another way out of this!*

## Excerpt # 4

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

In the training room on Bellona-4, Hikari was beginning to sweat now. The practice armor didn't have the cooling features of her main battle armor. She wore no power cell to aid in her movements. So when she did the wall-walk somersault it was done with pure athleticism, just as it was six years ago...

Her robes had been slashed by near misses. Her stomach was bleeding from a glancing blow--just the tip of the sword, pressed deep enough to cut. Both of Li's legs and arms were bleeding from similar blows. If she could just disable her, Hikari thought, perhaps she wouldn't have to kill...she could make an argument before the Shogun...

In the present Hikari was breathing hard. She was soaked with sweat. The moves came more easily for her now than they did then. They required less of her strength and concentration. But the emotional stress was much worse, for she understood it all so much better now...

Finally she got inside Li's defense. She overpowered her sword to the right, and slammed the butt of her sword in Li's jaw. Li dropped to the ground, totally unconscious.

Applause erupted from the crowd, as they anticipated what would come next. Hikari would bury her sword in Li's heart, and take the championship.

Except that wasn't going to happen.

"Speak the words." The Shogun said. "No." Hikari replied, drawing a gasp from the crowd. "We need fighters like her. You need fighters like her, my Lord. What is the point of wasting this talent?"

"I have no use of fighters who cannot kill." The Shogun replied. "We do not have the resources yet to build a fleet to protect ourselves. So we must rely on fear—the fear of an armed populace that will fight to the last breaths of the invaders."

## Excerpt # 4

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

"With swords and martial arts? I think not. You should have a shooting competition then if that is your goal. My Lord this is pointless. I will not kill my friend."

The Shogun turned to her parents. "What say you of this treason?" he asked. Her father replied first as her mother seemed paralyzed with shock. "This is her Grandmother's influence; I should have done more to drive it from her when she was young. I...I...accept the blame for this dishonor, and ask that my daughter not be punished for my failings as a parent." Hikari was momentarily surprised, but quickly realized that her father understood his daughter well. He was prepared for this moment.

"Such acceptance will not come without cost," Ivy replied. "Your council seat, your lands, your own honors in the games, all will be forfeit if blood is not spilled on this floor."

That was enough to draw a response from her mother. She screamed at her daughter: "You are ruining us! We will lose everything for your disrespect! *Kill the girl! She doesn't expect anything else.*"

"*Riko, please take hold of yourself,*" her father bellowed. Turning to the Shogun, he began. "I accept your terms and ask..."

"*Wait,*" his daughter yelled, gathering everyone's attention. "Master Shogun, I planned for no such sacrifices by my family. If you require a sacrifice, I will make it. If you want blood on the floor, then let it be mine." The crowd gasped again at her words, and began to murmur amongst themselves. Her mother blanched, and fainted dead away.

Her father protested, but guards seized him. A quick hand signal from the shogun, and he was struck with a stun pole, rendered unconscious.

Her ten year old brother hid his face in his mother's gown.

## Excerpt # 4

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Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

The Shogun stood, and drew the sword of leadership. He used his suit jets to sail upward, 20 feet in the air, his long purple cape billowing behind him. He landed in front of the girl, who was silently crying. "Don't worry, your wishes will be upheld. Your father is just unconscious. I would not have him suffer through this event."

He walked around her, and addressed the crowd. "Her courage is tremendous. But her wisdom is lacking. Both are required for survival of the challenge. Each of these girls has failed. And both shall die at my hand—beginning with the one who chose failure."

Shock would have been an appropriate reaction, but she just fell to her knees in acceptance. If the Shogun wanted that much blood, nothing would stop him. "Spill as much of my blood as you like," she said. "When you've had your fill, please consider sparing my friend." Without replying, he lifted the sword to behead her, and she bowed her head in acceptance.

"Kari!" Joe called out. Hikari looked up from her reverie, startled. She had been kneeling in the middle of the floor with her head bowed, still waiting for the blow that was not to come.

Joe was standing there in the same outfit he had purchased as a disguise on Earth. He looked exhausted, and she saw the telemetry strip on his head, indicating he'd been hurt.

"Joe! What...happened...your head... are you alright?" He rushed over to her as her armor melted away and she cast it behind her. Tears were streaming down her face.

"I'm fine. You weren't in your apartment, and you weren't answering your communicator, so I figured you might be here. As for the shorts and sandals, it's a long story."

He wiped away her tears and said, "You know, when I can't sleep I lift weights, or go for a swim—the swimming works best. Going over awful memories doesn't work nearly as well." She nodded and put her head on his shoulder.

## Excerpt # 4

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

"You were reliving the contest, weren't you?"

"Yep." She said. "I can do it move for move."

She put her arms around him as he held her close.

"What's funny is you came in at the same point you did last time."

### Chapter 103: Enter the Black Knight

Six years ago, a shadow leaped from the crowd. His jet-suit took him high in the air, and he landed between Hikari and the Shogun. Hikari looked up to see a man clad in black armor. There was no shine to it--it was as if light simply didn't exist where he stood.

The huge man addressed the shadow in a voice that was unnaturally calm. "Who dares to approach me, in my own arena?" The black figure spoke. "I'm one of the people from the outside you seem to fear so much. I'm a representative from your neighbors on Bellona-4. They call me The Black Knight."

"So you see!" he said to the crowd, and more to the point, to the thousands watching on live video. "The threat I spoke of is proven before you!" He focused again on the figure. "So were you sent as an emissary of war?"

"Actually I was sent as an emissary of peace. But after this display of barbarism I think you may get the war that frightens you so badly."

## Excerpt # 4

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

"Please explain."

"You are not signatories to the Safe Battle Treaty of 2306, but we are. Under the rules of that treaty, the only organization eligible to claim this system is the Bellona Mining Company. There is nothing on Katana-3 so valuable that another army would go through our system to attack you. No offense intended, but this place is a toxic hole without any valuable minerals to be found. It's simply not worth the trouble."

"In any case, if anyone were crazy enough to try to take this place, we are obligated by treaty to stop them. In fact, the worm ship on our side would close and lock to prevent access. We would fight to defend you, and all other signatories would come to our aid, regardless of the politics. Your enemies would meet an unstoppable army. Up until today, you were perfectly safe. It was brought to our attention that no one had ever explained this, and I was sent with the simple task of bringing good news."

The Shogun's eyes narrowed. "And what happened today to endanger us?"

"This contest: under the treaty, if a society is found to be excessively cruel or barbaric, the signatories have the freedom to put an end to it in any way they see fit. Forcing children to murder each other in a contest would be recognized by most signatories as meeting that criterion."

The Shogun smiled. "If I simply kill you, my friend, along with the two girls, then there will be no report."

"Sir, this suit does more than protect my body. The entire event has been transmitted to my ship, and retransmitted to the worm ship. They sent it on to my commander on Bellona-4. The signal is fed back to me from Bellona-4, so I know it has not been jammed."

The Shogun's smile faded. "So what do you propose?" "I propose you free these girls. Then you will make your contest optional, and remove the requirement of death. We'll put together an inspection committee to make sure there are no other forms of institutionally mandated murder

## Excerpt # 4

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

on your planet--I detected none in my time here so that shouldn't be a problem. For your compliance, you will be given protected status. You can stop being so afraid and actually do something productive here. You can have a military if you insist, but they'll be really bored."

"Protected" the Shogun said with derision and pride. "You would enslave us; deny us our freedom to live in the traditions of our own society." He was speaking more to his own people than the Black Knight, and the Black Knight spoke in kind.

"I don't think removing the so called 'tradition' of having children murder each other just as they come of age qualifies as slavery. I don't know anyone who could make that stretch of logic." Then he corrected himself. "Well, perhaps one or two people but believe me when I say you wouldn't want them as advocates. "

"Listen to his condescending tone!!! Tell me Shadow from another world, what happens if I refuse, and shove this sword in your chest?" The man in black took a step forward—and shrugged his shoulders.

"You are welcome to try. Should I defeat you, according to your own rules of succession, I would replace you as Shogun. I would then implement the reforms I discussed, sign the Safe Battle Treaty of 2306, and turn the entire planet over to BMC."

"Should I lose," the black figure continued, "You will face an invasion force far larger and better armed than you are prepared to fend off, I guarantee you." He added, "We're not really interested in having your world. Its resources are limited, its habitat is dangerous, its infrastructure is underdeveloped, and it's tactically insignificant." He took a few more steps forward. "But to end the barbaric and ritualistic slaughter of your youth, we're more than up to the challenge."

The Shogun looked up and away, at a group of colorful tapestries hung on the far wall. "Oh, and when you signal your sniper, don't be disappointed if he isn't terribly effective." A ball of white light burned through the tapestry and headed straight for the mysterious figure's head. A sphere of transparent blue energy momentarily appeared around him, and deflected it into the ceiling, vaporizing the glass above. "See what I mean?" he added, as the wind began to whistle through the opening.

## Excerpt # 4

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

"I will not be bullied in my own arena!" The Shogun shouted. "That shield will not work against my sword!" The man in the black suit didn't comment on the capabilities of his shield.

"Your point is?"

"My point? I will stick you to the ground with my point, and slaughter these imps with my bare hands, before your dying corpse! And my army will do the same to *anyone* who approaches here with the intent of taking our freedom!"

The Black Knight shook his head, and unclipped a black ball from his belt. It turned to liquid, and sprang outward, making the Shogun leap back. In a blink it became a sword that was a yard long, two inches wide, and as black as the Shogun's heart. "We'll see."

As the entire population of Katana-3 looked on, the Shogun lunged at The Black Knight. The Black Knight parried the attack to the right and backhanded his opponent with his left fist. Stunned, the Shogun failed to see the kick that drove him to the ground. The Shogun used his suit jets to scoot away, as he rolled and regained some sort of footing. As he regained his feet, the Black Knight was upon him again.

Desperately the arrogant leader tried to block the hail of attacks with his sword, but he soon found himself depending on his armor for protection. Sparks flew as metal struck metal. Blood flowed as the armor failed against the onslaught. Repeatedly the Black Knight struck with punches and kicks in addition to the sword strikes.

The Shogun rocketed into the air, some twenty feet off the ground, trying to buy himself some time. The Black Knight gave him some; as he soared to the same height, he backed about ten feet away. But the assault wasn't over—the physical assault was paused, while the logical assault resumed.

"I offered you mercy once. I offer it again. You are bleeding profusely. Submit to my terms and I

## Excerpt # 4

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

will let you continue as Shogun, over a period of peace and prosperity the likes of which your planet has not known. You will be renowned for your wisdom. Please accept the offer.” The Black Knight’s voice was calm and easy.

The Shogun’s voice was ragged, his breath shallow. “No...no mercy...you’re attack is spent, and now you shall face my wrath!” As his voice reached a crescendo, he aimed his sword at the Black Knight’s chest, and rocketed toward him.

The instant the Shogun refused, the Black Knight’s sword began to glow. A bright blue aura surrounded it. The shield that emanated from the black suit of armor was now focused around the sword. He had been toying with the Shogun all along.

In a split second, The Shogun was upon him. As the Black Knight’s own suit jets moved him to the side, he swung upward, cleaving the Shogun’s sword in two. He continued the arc in a lightning movement, drawing the glowing blade through back of the Shogun’s suit of armor. This lobotomized the control center of the suit, and shut down the power. The Shogun’s momentum smashed him against the wall, and gravity slammed him to the floor.

Before landing, the Black Knight surveyed the scene. The girls needed medical treatment quickly. The crowd was stunned, and all were so bound by this bizarre honor code that they probably would not attack him. With this estimation complete, he landed next to the broken Shogun.

“Finish it...” the bleeding, broken man whispered. The Black Knight shook his head. “Amazing—you crave murder even if it is your own.”

He turned towards the girls. “No, I’ll take these girls back to Bellona-4 for care. But when they are safe, and you are recuperating, I will return with a delegation to discuss your planet’s future.”

He turned to the crowd. “These girls will be free to return here when they wish. But for now I will see that they get medical care, and protect them with my own life.” His sword melted back into a

## Excerpt # 4

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

ball, and was returned to his belt. He drew a pair of emergency nanotech injectors from the other side of his belt, and injected both the girls. Microscopic robots sought out wounds and mend them.

“This will take care of you until you can get proper care,” he explained. He picked up Li Tarawa, and helped Hikari Daisuke to her feet.

As they passed the wreckage that was the Shogun, Hikari stopped. “Do you have another of those,” she asked. “Yes.”

He handed her the injector, and she placed it against the inside of the Shogun’s arm. There the armor was ruined, and the bare, bloody skin exposed. She activated the injector, and delivered the mercy that he rejected so profoundly.

### Chapter 104: Date Night

“What are you watching?” Hikari asked him, as she came out from behind the changing screen. She was wearing silver, silk pajamas that Joe bought her for her birthday. “Nothing really,” he replied. He lay back on the couch as she lay down on his chest. “You can put on what you’d like,” he said, wrapping his arms around her. Six years ago she asked—no, insisted—to join BMC as a warrior, to pay them back for her rescue. Gunsmith assigned her to protect Joe, but in reality, he wanted Joe to watch over her. At least this was the argument he gave to Joe, who insisted the poor girl had seen enough danger.

Gunsmith had his points though. Denying her the opportunity would have broken her spirit, and paring her up with Joe gave her instantaneous protection if something went wrong. And—this could not be denied—she was a tremendous fighter who would prove herself time and time again. In retrospect, it was the perfect decision. Their lives led parallel paths of self-inflicted exile, and each understood the other in ways that no one else could.

“Not that I’m in the mood to talk business,” she started.

## Excerpt # 4

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Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

“But you’re going to, I take it.”

“Yes.”

“Go on.”

“Does this mean my extended Earth assignment is complete, and I can go back to traipsing about with you?”

Joe considered the question. After a year or so, he had convinced Gunsmith to send to college on Earth. The argument was, if she was going to be an officer, she would benefit from higher education. Her fighting skills needed no development. She insisted on doing some work for BMC, so they gave her coordination and protection duties for BMC families on Earth. It was during this time that she became so close to the Zam family, who took her in as a daughter.

“I don’t know, Kari. I don’t know what we’re doing tomorrow. I’m sick of having you in danger...having everyone in danger...I’m sick of being in danger myself, for that matter.”

She turned to him and cupped his cheek with her hand. “It’s late, and we’re both too tired to think. I shouldn’t have brought it up. I’m just happy to be with you again.”

He grabbed the large, soft comforter that had been draped over the couch, and covered her with it, pulling her close in the process. It seemed like it was too long since they both felt safe and warm. It took him back to the evenings where they were together all the time. For the most part those were sad and dangerous times for both of them, but it reminded him that there was joy to be found in any situation.

Hikari picked a channel at random, but they never found out what was on. They were both

## Excerpt # 4

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.

Saturday, 23 March 2013 17:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 24 April 2013 01:38

---

asleep before the commercials were over.