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H ELL-BOUND

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In the gray stone ruins north of Ohryu City, Kairyon's Vessel--

-An unadorned, wooden disk six feet in diameter--waited to carry Haiyu to Hell. Beneath it lay not water but The Hole, a shaft through obsidian as wide as the Vessel. No ferryman stood by; Haiyu need only board for this ship to transport him.

"If you treasure life," old Ichino whispered, "you will not go."

Haiyu glanced toward the solitary figure in the doorway and suppressed a shudder. The old man's eyes, empty and a milky white, seemed to stare into his soul.

"The Lady calls whenever I dream," Haiyu said. His palm rested on the katana sheathed at his waist. "If I don't answer, I'll go mad."

Ichino said, "Death waits in your future."

"Mine, alone?"

"Do you so hate life that you'd hasten its end?"

"A wretched thing, life can be. I'll not be comfortable with the lot I've been given."

"Given or taken?" Ichino shook his head before he said, "I shall never see you, again."

"Then, live well that you might die smiling, sensei." Haiyu strode onto the disk and his journey began.

Kairyon's Vessel did not wobble beneath him; it descended smoothly, less a cannon blasted galleon than a rowboat with slow leaks.

The light from above dwindled like a dying star. After a time, it was so small as to vanish and the distance traveled became impossible to gauge.

Heat steadily intensified. Sweat rolled off him as though he approached a bonfire.

Eventually, the disk slowed. Was he finally approaching descent's end?

Below, he heard angry, apish grunts. A hoarse chuff silenced them.

Only a fool would now expect an uneventful arrival. Haiyu drew his sword. Cold

concern warred with the oppressive heat. How would he fight in total darkness? Slash at half discernable figures? Whatever waited could easily savage him.

Then, Kairyon's Vessel passed the widening peak of an arched doorway in the obsidian wall and orange light spilled into the shaft.

Beyond the doorway lay not the Hell of lore and artistry, but a strange, new land: a world beneath his own. Thick foliage, sweltering humidity, and tall trees swayed under a dank sky and an ochre colored sun, whose radiance stung Haiyu's eyes like furious wasps.

A fiendish party waited to welcome him.

A dozen muscular, albino humanoids with nappy hair pulled into topknots crowded around the shaft. They grasped cudgels and crude spears with knobby knuckled digits. Their mouths split with cruel humor when they beheld their visitor.

Behind this rabble waited a man in golden plate-mail. His sword blade curved like a crescent moon. Before Kairyon's Vessel came to rest, the golden clad stranger chuffed an order, and the humanoids surged forward, grunting with flesh-hunger and glee.

Haiyu's katana welcomed them, drawing blood and screams. With his first stroke, a pair of dismembered hands still clutching cudgels bounced across the ground.

The beast men struck with power but not precision. They swung and stabbed and grunted with equal wildness, more often hitting one another instead of the intended target.

With a roundhouse slash, Haiyu sent the humanoids scattering. Then, Haiyu danced a bloody, merry tarantella through the white furred creatures. The glancing blows he took numbed him, but he avoided serious damage.

When he was free of the obsidian shaft, a few beast folk wailed or tried to stop their bleeding with clutching, clumsy digits. Others lay still, their spirits brooding in what place waited beyond pain.

Now, Haiyu faced their master.

No words needed speaking. Haiyu and stranger came at each other with tongues of steel. Their wits matched once, twice. Neither seemed poised to easily win their

deadly debate. Sparks exploded with the third. These men were evenly matched; only surprise could end this.

Haiyu scuffed dirt into his opponent's eyes. The golden armored man swung his sword wildly before him, as he clawed the blinding grit away.

Haiyu pressed his advantage. Came low and alongside. Jabbed the tip of his blade into the softness between the golden plates.

His opponent crashed to his knees, lips trembled with something resembling a smile. The stranger nodded once, chuffed something both indecipherable and oddly grateful and then fell.

Those albino brutes still capable of flight hooted with terror as they scattered into the jungle. After a brief moment, only their dead remained as proof of their presence.

Haiyu studied the lush surroundings. Neither paths nor trails broke the verdant tree line, not even where the brutes had vanished. This foliage, it seemed, devoured progress.

Where to begin? Haiyu could not be expected to search every square inch of this unknowably vast and unexplored land. Who could say what strange and carnivorous fauna dwelled among the wide fronds and narrow trunk trees, or crawled beneath the vine and brush blankets growing over the earth floor?

Was The Lady even in this jungle or was she elsewhere, in whatever world lay beyond it? Too many questions...

He listened, but heard only the sounds of the local wildlife. Movements among the branches and the droning of wings, bird cries and rodent skitters, a far off chittering. Nothing of The Lady.

Her voice had pierced his nighttime rest, it did not return to guide him now while he stood awake. Did he have to sleep here before she could speak, again? That idea seemed nothing short of suicide.

The battle weariness set in, as lightning adrenaline ceased charging through his blood lines. It was time for the breathing trick.

Ichino-sensei had taught him a method that, through concentration and steady res-

piration, he might wring the worst of the exhaustion from his soul as water from a rag.

He dropped to a meditative position -- legs crossed, katana on his lap -- and cleared his mind, tuned down the sensations from the immediate world and heightened his attunement to the workings of his own body. He felt every shift and movement of his diaphragm, extending his control to almost impossible degrees of precision. When his lungs filled with air, he felt them expand. He could almost feel the dynamic conversion processes that transformed raw yin chi into more tangible stuff, which his body used for power. Exhalation carried a passel of the negative energies, the yang chi, out of him. He released these vapors and waited for them to disperse. This piecemeal expiration was necessary, as it guaranteed he would never mistakenly expel too much negative energy. For that way held even worse effects. Balanced chi was necessary for health. Too much yin was just as debilitating as an excess of yang.

After he took the second cleansing breath and paused for the transformative process, he heard someone call his name. It was the voice from his dreams; it was The Lady.

Air flooded out his mouth and awareness of the surrounding jungle returned. The weariness still clung to him for his relaxation technique had been interrupted near to the beginning.

He waited, holding as still as possible, striving for the slightest hint of her voice on the wind.

Nothing.

Was that moment -- her speaking his name -- only a fantasy? Or could she only communicate to a mind that was momentarily free from the physical world?

What was sleep but a break from the matters of the flesh? Sleep, Haiyu knew, was ultimately necessary but unrefined. Ichino-sensei had given him sutras and meditative techniques, which offered better restorations. They were to be used sparingly, for though it was unrefined, sleep was a general cure-all, while the techniques were quite specific in what they aided.

Could one of these techniques put him in such a state as to be more receptive to The Lady's summons? It certainly seemed a possibility.

Not for the first time, Haiyu wondered at the nature of his Summoner. What strange power might she be using to speak with him so? She certainly had full range of uses of chi to be able to enter his dreams. Was she wholly human anymore? Strong manipulations of the energies of creation left no soul unscathed...

Had he made a mistake coming into this strange land to pursue such a soul?

Too late to think of such, now. A glance revealed Kairyon's Vessel was gone. It was probably once again ascending to the gray stone temple he'd come from. There remained only The Lady. After her safety was secured they might venture to some place less overwhelmed with the Wild. To do what? Settle, perhaps, and live out his days as husband or father, as landowner or worker? Unlikely, but only the future could say.

One thing was certain, however: the wretched thing he had so longed to leave had not followed him down the shaft. That thing he had damnably called Life was not what beat in his chest or buzzed through his head, was not Life at all but ultimately revealed to be lifestyle alone.

Down here, he felt born afresh, with the past's failures to lord and duty erased from all but his heart, and while that registry of misdeeds and regrets bore a lifetime very nearly equable to its owner, no one but the owner could ever hope to know all his own flaws. No law said an owner must read the deeds imprinted in that private ledger. Haiyu knew many who remained purposefully ignorant of their histories. With time he might forget the betrayals and dishonor...

These ruminations wasted too many seconds. The present demanded him. The Lady must be found before any future might be considered.

Haiyu cleared his mind, breathed in the fresh air, refreshed his spirit, and then exhaled the fatigue. After a moment's reflection on the balance of all things, he started the process again. Inhaled. Refreshed. Exhaled.

As negative flowed out and positive rooted within, Haiyu heard The Lady's voice. "Come to me. Come now, Haiyu."

Her voice seemed distant, but the words repeated regularly. Like a beacon.

Haiyu turned his face and grew aware of nuances in The Lady's message. The beckons grew loudest when his face basked fully in the alien light and nearly silenced

when he turned fully into shadow.

The Lady, then, dwelled in the direction of the sun, which Haiyu discovered was setting. No more dawdling. Fully refreshed, he now entered the jungle.

There was one advantage to venturing toward day's end. The scattering brutes had ventured into the trees in every direction but this. Whatever else awaited Haiyu, that welcoming party was not among them.



Initially, the way was treacherous. Haiyu learned quickly what things he might tread upon without care and what colored vines hid recesses or burrows or other hazards.

The air among these trees stank of decay and sweet flowers.

Always overhead or beyond the edge of sight, came the crash and rustle of beasts moving among the limbs.

An hour before dark, Haiyu found his way barred by a thatched collection of vines and twigs, a woven web six feet in diameter adorned with a man-sized and -shaped fetish. Eerie but avoidable, Haiyu simply walked around it.

Not far beyond lay a second web and fetish collection, nearly three times the prior one's size. When the wind carried through the branches overhead, the swaying trees made the wood figures dance on their lines. Again, Haiyu walked out of his way to avoid it.

The third was nearly four times the size of the second. The fourth spanned dozens of trees. No avoiding this.

Haiyu used his katana to chop apart the vines and scampered through the hole he'd made.

The fifth such web stretched beyond sight, and the wooden fetishes he could see adorning it numbered nearly one hundred. As these figures danced and bobbed in the

wind, they creaked like strung corpses.

The vines here were thicker. It took multiple slashes to open a way through them. The fourth cut chopped into one of the dolls. The dry wood wrenched apart and brackish smoke poured from the hollow interior like water from an overturned barrel. The smoke did not disperse. It lingered in the air and then moved with purpose, as a living creature might. Soon, it surrounded Haiyu, attacked his sinuses and mouth, invaded his eyes and lungs.

He coughed and cut at the smoke, to no avail.

The air shivered, as with thunder, and three masculine voices boomed from afar.

"Who disturbs our life webs?" New sounds, now: The crunch and thrum of a heavy walker approaching through the jungle.

Haiyu tried to escape the smoke by moving around, but the stuff stayed on him like ink.

"The bitter air reveals you, murderer," those voices again spoke in unison, loud as three raging storms. "What manner of being would make so grave a trespass?"

"Call off your smoke to see me."

Three guffaws answered this and then three voices said, "Such large bravado for one so small. Very well."

The earth beneath Haiyu's feet trembled when an enormous drum began banging. Not a drum at all, he discovered when the obscuring smoke flowed away, but a pair of gargantuan hands clomping together in applause.

What stood among the trees was not human. Though the creature had a humanoid body, it was sized nearly twenty feet tall and colored the purple blue of wild berries. Three pairs of red eyes arranged in three faces smashed onto a single head glared down at him. That damnably strange smoke whirled through the air over its crown like swarming flies, while tongues of fire flicked across three sets of lips like the tails of angry cats. "Been some time," the giant said, the three mouths speaking at once, "since we've seen a man among our trees." No longer applauding, its hands reached down. Around the giant's waist hung a belt weighted down with bulging sacks. Its only weapons appeared to be a pair of wooden sticks, as long and slender as fishing

spears.

"What manner of bakemono are you?"

"We are Giro the Kairo-Oni. Time is ours. Lives are ours. And you have ruined a life before its time." One hand raised, and one finger indicated the ravaged husk.

"Each of these is the life of a blessed one. The protected souls of those heaven deems especially worthy. It is our task to safeguard them, and now because of you, a man lies sick and dying. His life force escapes."

"I thought you'd never seen a man."

"We have not, but we safeguard them."

"This jungle seems especially difficult to safeguard anything in."

The giant's eyes regarded him coldly. "The husks are poisonous; no dweller here would dare to harm them. But you. The traveler from above. The proud warrior. You have damned another."

Haiyu stared into the husk, which even now disintegrated before his eyes. "This was a man's life?"

"Indeed," the giant said, "and there is only one way to save him. Replenish his chi by sacrificing your own." Haiyu heard clicks and wheeled to again face the giant.

Giro had drawn the two sticks from his pouch. Their tips, sharpened to points, were bound together with supple vines. The giant began to whirl and tap these sticks together, and lines of colorful vegetation fed out of its pouches.

Haiyu readied to attack, but the smoke rushed around him again. He coughed and chopped, to no avail. He shortly discovered that this was nothing more than a distraction when the real attack came from behind and above. The dangling threads of the foliage webs were alive and wrapped round him like ropes or boneless fingers.

They snaked around Haiyu's mouth and throat, his thighs and calves, his waist and shoulders. In an instant, he was trussed and hoisted into the air. Then, splinters scraped and gouged him. He'd been pulled onto the broken fetish, and the vines were holding him in place.

The smoke flowed away, returned to circle the giant's crown.

The creature's sticks continued moving, crafting a web of vines, colorful and glis-

tening and proportioned to Haiyu's size. It was making a blanket to tuck him into the fetish.

Combat instincts took over. Haiyu flailed, but the vines were too thick and strong. Though he still held his katana, what good did that weapon serve in a hand unable to raise or swing it? No use at all. Then what could he--

The teachings.

The Path of the Warrior, called Bushido among the soldiers and courtiers, was built upon the Thousand Deaths. By meditating on all the ways a man might die, he first inured himself to fear. Further teachings could let a man circumvent his fate, if perhaps only momentarily. Animated vines and blue skinned giants did not enter into Bushido's considerations -- should he survive, this might make a fine Thousand-and-One Death -- but this situation bore similarities to another. Particularly the Death of the Poison Sting.

In a secluded grove of Ohryu Province, the monks of the Shintau cultivated the beautiful and deadly lilly called The Poison Sting. From its petals came a terribly potent extract that caused paralysis and slow death. The Masters of the Ohryu Schools knew of this plant, and had devised a means by which to deal with a small amount of its poison.

Heat, they had discovered, could eradicate the effects.

Haiyu's sensei had taught that by will alone, a warrior could manipulate his chi in such a manner as to alter the body's temperature, thus burning the poison out of his blood. This should not be undertaken lightly, for raising the body's temperature too high could cause madness or death. And yet this technique was only the first of five. Haiyu's sensei had shown how mastery of this basic temperature control method opened the door to the second. By mastering the chi of the body, one could then master the raw chi of the air itself and raise the heat of the surrounding atmosphere without burning one's own precious flesh. Beyond mere theory, Ichino-sensei had demonstrated this, by causing smoke to pour from his own robes.

Magic, the students had whispered.

No, Ichino-sensei had replied, it is an example of the ultimate honing of Will.

The effective radius was too small to use as an offensive technique, but it might be enough to save Haiyu from his current predicament.

If only he had not been one of the worst students of the technique. He'd mastered only the initial piece, that of raising the skin's temperature. The second order had eluded him.

But at the time of learning, his life had not been at stake.

Here he had no alternative. Even now, he was being woven into a wooden fetish.

Haiyu concentrated. The mantras flowed through his mind and off his tongue:

All is chi, for chi is the energy of creation. It was the first of all the lessons he'd learned. The words returned to him flavored with incense.

Heating the heart warms the blood. In an instant, the vitae rushing through his veins grew noticeably hotter. Soon, his veins held lava.

Heating the blood warms the body. Already sweaty from the jungle's humidity, Haiyu suddenly grew even more so, and he fairly dripped. Had he leapt into a bathing spring pool, he would have become no wetter.

Heating the body warms the wind. Now every part of Haiyu was a furnace, the very air in his lungs could scald.

Heating the wind burns the world. If his chi was balanced and in proper control, the simple act of breathing should break the barrier between the first order and the second. If all was well, he should exhale conflagration and inhale cool air.

Heat flooded his nostrils and mouth.

Flowed out and into the air.

Some of the vines loosened or was that wishful thinking? Another breath. Burn the world.

Inhalation brought with it the wonderful stink of singed vegetation.

Burning the world frees the soul.

In an instant, the vines holding him caught fire. They released him and flailed. This only caused the flames to grow.

Giro shrieked with terror and tried to smother the blaze before it spread to the fetishes.

**Not one to lose the advantage, Haiyu fled into the jungle.
The giant's curses pursued him, as did the stink and crackle of burning wood.**



With full darkness Haiyu built camp and meditated. In his mind, The Lady's voice sang loud. So very close, now. Only a matter of hours, perhaps.

Haiyu set out with the dawn.



He found empty nests and brittle remains of insects, large as his head with serrated stingers as long as his pinky. The bodies were as empty as the wooden fetishes in Giro's life webs, he discovered upon treading one to ashes. What horror had befallen these things?

Something long gone, apparently. Haiyu encountered no living beasts as he continued on. The sounds he had grown accustomed were gone. He walked amongst silence. Was this part of the jungle actually lifeless?

What of The Lady?

After a moment's meditation, he heard her voice. Very close. She still lived, then. A prisoner of whatever horror was responsible for all this destruction? Perhaps. Was she possibly the restless spirit of this strange evil's victim? He prayed to all the kami he knew of that this not be the case.

Haiyu's katana remained sheathed, but his hand remained on the pommel ready to draw it at any provocation.

Soon, he found a dwelling place.

It was a squat, domed structure perhaps as wide as a Shinto shrine -- a single room designed to fit two dozen, standing worshippers. The place had sandy stone brick

walls and a single entryway sealed by a pair of weathered wooden doors adorned with creepers, dead but clinging.

Haiyu shoved these doors open, and the hinges wailed like disemboweled women. Inside, the place was a single room. In the center stood a stone altar, upon which reclined a beautiful woman with golden skin, gorgeous hips and flimsy garments woven from gauze. Her full, scarlet lips turned up in a smile of pure adoration, and her arms opened toward him.

"Haiyu," she said, and any lingering doubts he might have had about her identity vanished. This was the voice he had been following. This was The Lady. "Will my savior deliver me from this unclean place?"

Her loveliness demanded his attention. He saw not the gnawed bones he trod to reach her.

He embraced her, and she wrapped him in warmth. Her lips proved moist and her tongue practiced. Her breath whispered heat and naked promises into his ears. Her teeth ripped into his throat, sharper than any steel.

Somehow, he shoved free of her. Stumbled away.

She moved toward him, and now he saw the manacles on wrists and ankles, the chains holding her to the altar.

"The venom is excruciating," she said, "but through my kiss, you'll be ageless. A perfect leader for my worshippers. I'll wash you in blood, clothe you in gold--"

"Clothe me in gold armor?" Haiyu said. "Bid me lead your horde of debased brutes? Make me long for a better swordsman to kill me? No, pretty fiend."

Her face slipped. The flesh actually sagged. Something else glistened beneath it.

Haiyu finally had his answer: the wielding of chi powers had scathed more than merely a soul. This was no Lady at all. Not even human. The comely appearance was merely a costume stitched of others' flesh, the lovely face a mask. What hid beneath was chitin-sheathed. A mockery of humanity.

How could Haiyu not see so before? Eldritch sorcery, perhaps? The blinding elixir of lust?

The thing inside The Lady asked, "Would you die in agony?"

Haiyu could not answer. His throat felt dry and tight. He stumbled forward. Eager for another embrace, It came to the end of its chains.

Haiyu used the last of his strength to bring his katana around.

The beautiful mask smiled, even as the inhuman head beneath bounced across the floor. Steam and bloody pudding bubbled out the stump, as the creature flailed, helpless and agonized and dying. It finally collapsed upon the altar and lay still.

Haiyu fell onto the stones shortly after. Staring at the ceiling as the darkness came upon him, he felt nothing but satisfaction. Because of his actions, no other man from the world around or above need suffer that creature's dream summons. This proved a finer coda to the wretched thing the old Haiyu had called life than he had ever expected. His lips stretched with a smile as death stole upon him.

Would he wake again soon? Would he find himself reborn as a third Haiyu?

So many questions. Too many. Enough!

Best not to wonder but to venture forth and see.

THE END