

The American Samurai Troopers

What if the story of the Samurai Troopers took place in modern times, in the USA? What if three out of five Samurai Troopers were female?

Von Zpan_Sven

Kapitel 3: Chapter Three: Under the Sea of Fire

THE AMERICAN SAMURAI TROOPERS

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DISCLAIMER: I do not own YST/Ronin Warriors, only this story and the alterations I have made to the characters, histories, ect. No profit is being made from this; this is being written solely for the enjoyment of myself and others whom like to indulge in the scenario of 'what if?'

AUTHOR' NOTES: One of my infamous 'What If?' fanfics, where I take some of my ideas, the plot of an anime and throw them in the blender set on puree just to see what happens.

Abandon hope all ye who enter here... For here be gender-bending, cross-dressing, and teenagers being teenagers! And 500+ year old Dark Warlords being perverted old men! And a pretty-boy gay teenaged Yulie too, later on! I've taken elements from the original version and the Americanized version to so there will be the original names for the warlords and the Americanized names for the Troopers in the same story. General insanity shall abound as I unleash this twisted creation upon the world...

"Some believe it is the ability to speak that separates us from the animals..."

'I think, there for I am...'

:Our minds are as one...:

SUMMARY: A 'What if' fic. What if the story of the Samurai Troopers took place in modern times, in the USA? What if three out of five Samurai Troopers were female? Pity Ryo, Rowen, and the Warlords, because dealing with three powerful females with PMS and often violent mood-swings won't be pretty...

CHAPTER SUMMARY: With the dormant volcano Mt Helios showing signs of unexpected activity, Mia and Yulie head there with hopes of finding Ryo of the Wildfire. They find him and Shuten Doji as well...but it won't be as easy to find the other four Troopers...

RATING: R

WARNINGS: Violence, swearing, and sexual innuendo and situations...and my depraved sense of humor XD

GENRE: Action & Adventure/Drama/Supernatural/Humor

ARCHIVE: FanFiction(dot)Net, FicWad(dot)Com, Zpan Sven's Works, others please ask

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CHAPTER THREE: UNDER THE SEA OF FIRE

Location: Hell's Cove, Washington, USA

Date & Time: May 27, 2007, mid-morning

Invasion: Day Three

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Within the dubious safety of the bus station, the Guardian Beast lifted his head to regard the Ancient. Many hours had passed since the five Samurai Troopers had been scattered in an attempt to keep them out of Arago's clutches and now they would have to journey to find the young Samurai. Kaosu placed his hand reassuringly on the broad head of the tiger and smiled faintly.

"It's time my friend. I'll watch over them while you begin the search," the old monk's voice was soft and whispery, strained from age and failing health.

Whiteblaze rose to his feet silently before looking down at the sleeping pair. The preteen shifted in his sleeping bag, salvaged from the store he'd led Mia to. To the tiger, the boy was a cub, a cub that smelled of the Spring with loyalty forever branded in his heart and soul. Wise brown eyes lifted inquiringly to the Ancient, who nodded once.

"I feel it to, the call to that armor within him. And if we can, then they shall be able to as well..." he sighed softly. "They will not get him, just as we shall not allow them to get the Troopers."

Seemingly satisfied with this answer, the Tiger turned and exited the bus station, leaving the two mortals within under the Ancient's care. The Monk sighed, sitting down on one of the hard plastic benches in the shadows to wait.

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The scent of blood and magic hadn't faded since the battle; to the tiger, it remained as pungent as if it had just happened. Around him, the city continued to decay, an entrance to the subway crumbling in on itself. Not good, not good at all, Whiteblaze knew, his head lowering as he scented the ground. He could smell it, a trace of the armor of Wildfire. Tail swishing to and fro, the Guardian Beast continued his search, his large paws moving silently over the cracked, broken pavement. After a few moments of tracking the magic-scent of Wildfire, he found it at last...

...one of the paired katana belonging to the Wildfire armor, embedded point first into the pavement. It gleamed, shimmering like a heatwave and the tiger nosed the hilt, and nostrils flaring as he inhaled the scent of his cub Ryo. He snorted, turning his head away and surveying the surrounding city; it was crumbling, decaying as though abandoned centuries ago instead of only two days ago. The cubs were missing and he had to find them, and to do that he'd need the help of the female and that younger

cub. So be it, it's not like he had any other choice.

Neck arching as his head turned, opening his jaws, Whiteblaze carefully gripped the hilt of the katana in his mouth and after a few tugs, had it free from the pavement. Working his jaw to settle it comfortably, the tiger scanned his surroundings warily and saw darting shadows here and there. The Dynasty's Soldiers were becoming more active, meaning they were searching for the tiger and his wards. Not good, he had to move and move fast...

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Shifting in the salvaged sleeping bag, Mia rolled onto her back and wearily opened her eyes to stare at the ceiling of the bus station. So...it hadn't been a dream then, the world really was ending and unless she helped find the five teens that could halt the Invasion then all hope was lost. Her body protested having slept on the hard bench for several hours as she forced herself to sit up, unzipping the sleeping bag. Swinging her legs out of the sleeping bag, she paused after slipping her feet back into her shoes; her mind, still whirling to process the events of the previous days has caught on the fact that it was the third day of the invasion and that lead her thoughts to the date.

Tomorrow was her nineteenth birthday and here she sat in the middle of the end of the world...

Mia bit back a groan and shook her head. No, now was not the time for feeling sorry for herself because if she even wanted to celebrate any more birthdays, if anyone else wanted to celebrate another birthday, then Arago had to be stopped. Bringing her hands up, she raked back the strands that had escaped the braid she'd pulled her hair back in before lying down and wondered if there was any running water. The sound of Yulie shifting on the next bench had her lifting her head and she smiled sadly at the sight of the pre-teen. The poor boy, first losing his parents in the Invasion, then witnessing the Earth's only true defense get scattered to the winds...

Sluggishly he awakened and Yulie stared at her blankly before blinking the sleep from his eyes as he pushing himself up. He sat for a moment, mentally reviewing the events of the past two days before interlocking his fingers and lifting his hands over his head. His back arched as his arms stretched and there was a pleasant popping of vertebrae realigning before he unlaced his fingers and dropped his hands down. Unzipping his sleeping bag, he looked over at her.

"Have you seen Whiteblaze? He was sleeping between us when I finally fell asleep..." Yulie murmured, rubbing at the lingering stiffness in his shoulder.

Startled, she looked down at the spot on the floor between them; the blankets they had spread out for the tiger was rumpled where he had slept. Confused, she stood and heard Yulie tossing back his open sleeping bag, his feet slipping into his sneakers as he rose to his feet. "I don't know. Perhaps he needed to use the bathroom or he's prowling around..."

"I sent him to begin searching for Ryo of the Wildfire, actually," an older man's voice,

soft and whispery, informed them.

Surprised, both turned to face the old monk who stood at the large window looking onto the street. He was tall and slender, his shoulders broad and square despite the age his long white hair suggested. The man wore not the garb of a Christian monk as they might have expected given the predominately Judah-Christian culture of the region, but rather what Mia recognized as a Japanese Buddhist monk, complete with the traditional conical straw hat, an amigasa. The blue of the monk's over-kimono appeared almost black in the dimly light morning.

"W-who the hell are you?!" Yulie was the first one of the pair to regain his voice and he took a step forward, bristling indignantly.

"I am Kaosu, young Yulie," he introduced himself, turning to face them; the amigasa hung at an angle that hid his eyes away in shadows.

"Kaosu?" Mia murmured; her eyes lingered on the staff he held, its very top was even to his shoulder and the numerous rings chimed softly. That staff, it looked like... "Are you the Ancient?"

"The who?" Yulie asked skeptically, eyeing the old monk, who tilted his head, bowing faintly to the auburn-haired young woman.

"I am he, Mia the Scholar. Your grandfather has taught you well," he complimented her; surprised by his praise, the young woman blushed faintly. "Whiteblaze, is as you have obviously noticed, no mere tiger. He is the Guardian Beast of the Samurai Troopers and if anyone can help start the journey to find them it is he."

"Then Ryo and the others are alright?" Yulie asked, brightening in relief that the five teens weren't possibly killed by that black tornado of energy.

"Yes, right now they are just resting, regaining their strength. If I had not intervened when I did, they'd be in Arago's hands now," the Ancient informed them as the pair started to gather the supplies they had salvaged. "Whiteblaze shall return shortly, and then we can depart to retrieve Ryo of the Wildfire."

As though summoned by the monk's words, Whiteblaze pushed the door open and entered the bus station with his discovery; the katana blade gleamed with energy, shimmering unnaturally. The monk regarded the recovered sword with interest, holding out a hand. The katana was handed over to the man who had forged it, its twin, and the armor the blades went with. Turning it, studying it, he made a thoughtful hum in his throat at the way the energy that lingered on the mystical weapon pinged with his, telling him all he needed to know about young Wildfire's present location.

So the armors had returned to where he had forged them. It was the most logical thing for the nearly-sentient armors to do really, retreat to the place of forging, to gain the strength the bearers' need to properly wield them. He turned to the Scholar and boy to see they had shouldered the packs with their sleeping bags and supplies.

"We will need to move swiftly from here on out – the Dynasty is searching for us," the Ancient advised as he handed the katana over to Mia. "Perhaps if we can rig a sheath, it'll be easier to carry..."

A few moments later and the tiger was peering cautiously out the door; finding it clear Whiteblaze looked back to the Ancient and nodded once before stepping out of the bus station. The trio of humans followed the Guardian Beast, the recovered Wildfire katana secured with canvas and rope in a hastily made sheath on Yulie's back, and together they walked further into the city...

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Location: Mt Helios, Washington, USA

Date & Time: May 27, 2007, mid-morning

Invasion: Day Three

The long dormant volcano seemed to be waking from its long slumber, with a thick black plume of smoke that lazily drifted up from the crater. The interior was awash in a brilliant orange glow, with waterfalls of magma cascading to gather in the crater, forming a massive pool of molten rock. Floating face down in the magma was Ryo of the Wildfire, his armor a few shades darker than the magma itself. The molten liquid bubbled slowly before it began to ripple as he stirred to consciousness.

'Righteousness...'

Groaning behind his faceplate, he shifted, his hands dragging over the stone at the bottom of the pool of magma; bracing himself he pushed himself up on shaking arms. His voice was raspy, strained as he croaked out in confusion. "...what?"

Lifting his head, his blurry vision took in the glow; as his vision cleared, he frowned in surprise, studying the orange glow that illuminated the crater. The last thing he remembered clearly was the fight against Shuten Doji and that twister that came out of no where, which had to be Arago's doing. "...a volcano?! You've got to be kidding me!"

He stumbled even as he pushed himself up to his feet, the soft rattle of his armor mingling with the cascades of magma splashing around him; looking down he found himself unharmed by the magma that dripped from his armor – this must be the armor's work, then, protecting him from the intense heat. Standing fully, he looked up at the lip of the crater, far over head. An aggravated sigh escaped him. "Great...stuck down here when I need to be up there. Well, time's wasting -- I need to get back to the others..."

If it hadn't been for the training of his grandmother, the fact he had to climb so far up might have been disheartening. But as it was? He made a promise to buy his Granny something extra nice when this was all over, because without her training he'd have been dead in the first actual battle with that Dynasty Soldier. His armored fingers dug into the side of the rock, finding purchase even as he carefully tapped the rock with

the tips of his armored boots to form foot-holds.

A third of the way up, he paused, resting his helm against the rocky wall as he took a calming steadying breath before looking back over his shoulder. Immediately he averted his eyes, focusing on the lip of the crater. That...was a long way down...

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Location: Arago's Castle, Dynasty, Youjakai

Date & Time: May 27, 2007, mid-morning

Invasion: Day Three

The throne room was empty and dark save for the light of Cruelty's candle and the Viewing Mirror. Shuten's chortle echoed in the empty chamber as he observed the demolished building the previous day's battle had taken place on. Ohhh victory, how sweet it was... Those little armor-wearing brats never stood a chance against the might of the Dynasty!

"I would not be so quick to laugh quite yet, Shuten," the familiar voice of Anubisu chastised him.

The red-head spun gracefully on his heel and he frowned sullenly at the older Warlord, who appeared even as his candle lit. Illusions' candle flickered to life and the eldest Warlord stood there as well, a hand on one hip. Of course, the old men had to make their opinions known, he concluded grumpily even as he questioned them. "And why not?"

"Because you did not see them die. You have no way to verify your kills," the Wolven Warlord reminded him sharply, a hint of disapproval in that guttural voice of his.

The wolf-green eyes gleamed in the dimly lit throne room as they studied the younger Warlord. For a moment Shuten felt like he'd just gotten Cruelty again and was just a young man standing before them instead of the centuries old Warlord he was.

"For all you are aware they survived and are recovering," Rajura added as Venom's candle began to burn; the second youngest Warlord stood farther back, his arms crossed over his chest.

"They were most certainly killed – destroyed so utterly there was nothing left of them," Shuten insisted.

"If that is the case, then it would be due to the fact Arago-sama interceded on your behalf," Anubisu stated logically.

"For children they fought a remarkable battle," Rajura grudgingly admitted. "They fought back with everything they had, even when the odds looked hopeless."

"You certainly did well," Naaza commended before arching a brow. "But they got to you too. That Torrent, with his injuries – you were obviously not expecting him to

rejoin the battle like he did. And as for Wildfire...well, that was quite impressive, sending his surekill down your own chains at you."

"They were stronger than you believed them to be," Anubisu added, crossing his arms over his chest. "They might have been young and lacked the experience you did, but there was no reason to dismiss them as you did before."

"Hmph. They didn't stand a chance, even with those armors. They went in a Trooper short to begin with!" Shuten proclaimed, gesturing to the Mirror and the devastated city it showed. "They were weak."

"You are certain?" Rajura queried, arching a brow questioningly as he turned to look over the Mirror. "While the devastation unleashed is impressive, their armors are much like our own."

"We saw the entire battle, Shuten. It almost seems that they taught you a lesson or two," Naaza agreed, his lips quirked faintly in sardonic amusement.

"Lessons I already thought you knew," Anubisu chided him reproachfully, frowning his disapproval.

Immediately they could feel it, the Emperor's presence even as his voice echoed, the spectral helm appearing at the dais, "This is not the time for idle chatter, my Warlords."

"Arago-sama!" Shuten spun to face the demon Emperor and all four Warlords immediately bowed to their Master in greeting, their armored fists slamming over their chests in reflexive salute.

"The Samurai Troopers have been defeated, by the dark power of the Dynasty," Arago reminded them bluntly.

"Hai, Arago-sama," Shuten murmured in agreement. "It was a glorious display of your strength, one that they would never recover from had they survived it--"

"Now is not the time for you to be so optimistic," Arago informed him. "While my power was overwhelming, their armors and an outside force protected them from destruction. They could eventually return to resume their battle against my Dynasty. In fact--"

The Mirror behind them changed its view, from the devastated cityscape to focus on a massive white tiger, with a familiar pair on his back; the two civilians watched over by Torrent and the Troopers' Guardian Beast! Shuten's eyes widened at the sword the boy carried on his back – that was---!

Anubisu stepped forward beside Shuten, studying the scene thoughtfully; so the female and pup was leaping into the fray were they?

"Given the angle of what little sunlight there is, I'd say they're heading in a north-

northeastern direction," the hunter-tracker of the four murmured thoughtfully, his eyes narrowed. "They're making good speed – they could be to the boundary in moments."

"The one called Ryo of the Wildfire shall rise shortly should these mortals find him," the Emperor stated and the youngest Warlord spun to face him, bowing.

"I understand, Arago-sama," Shuten acknowledged and slide his eyes to glower at the mirror. "Please, allow me to finish these annoying insects off on your behalf."

"Go, my Warlord, and show them the Cruelty of my Dynasty!"

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Location: Hell's Cove, Washington, USA

Date & Time: May 27, 2007, mid-morning

Invasion: Day Three

The katana rattled with every stride of Whiteblaze's legs, thumping almost reassuringly against Yulie's back. His arms were wrapped securely around Mia's waist and even through the denim of his shorts and the Beast's fur, he could feel the bunching and coiling of the supernatural creature's powerful muscles; to be able to carry both their weight while being able to run at a full gallop... If he'd held any lingering doubts about the creature's origins, this would have washed them away. The wind whipped around them, the faint whistle mingling with the tiger's paws striking the pavement.

Her knuckles were white from the tight grip she had on Whiteblaze's coat, clinging to his back stubbornly with the fear of falling and dragging Yulie down with her in the back of her mind. She knew the Ancient One was near, would rejoin them after he handled the biggest obstacle in their way.

A sound that didn't belong was Yulie's warning and his ears seemed to twitch; he glanced back over his shoulder to see the rapidly gaining horsemen and chariots. His hazel eyes widened in surprise – the Ancient was busy clearing their path! They'd be caught in a pincher formation--!

"Shit! Mia, we got company!" He yelped even as the first arrows whistled past their heads.

With a quick glance over her shoulder, she bit her lower lip before returning her gaze ahead of them. "We have to have confidence in the Ancient..."

Right. Confidence in the old monk; he tried, really he did but the more arrows that whizzed by his head was really shaking that confidence...! Turning his head he glared at the force chasing after them; his eyes landed on the largest of the chariots and the familiar armored form of Shuten Doji. Dammit! Was there no escaping that guy?!

Turning his head back to face forward, he swallowed the knot of dread that welled in

his throat. "Mia, we got a Warlord on our tail!"

Licking her suddenly dry lips, Mia prayed in silent desperation for the Ancient to hurry back to them...

From where he stood on the chariot, Shuten watched his archers herding the two civilians and their supernatural steed; once they were in the blind alley... He chuckled darkly in grim amusement. "You'll not get away that easily!"

As the next volley of arrows was prepared, he could hear a noise, over the clattering of hooves and chariot wheels, a sound that was abnormal given how soft it was... Chiming, rings of metal tinkling against each other melodically. It was the only warning the Warlord had when the tiger suddenly veered from the course they had been herding him towards, the same second something – a spear? – impacted in the pavement of the street ahead.

Throwing up an arm to shield his sensitive eyes from the sudden flaring of golden-hued light, his sense of hearing was overwhelmed by that blasted chiming, seeming overwhelm even the sound of the earth breaking open. Even as he reeled, he was already undoing the chain of his kusari-gama from around his waist. The brilliant wall of holy light broke the ground open, slicing through buildings, light-rail tracks, anything that stood in its way, forming a deep fissure the charging Dynasty forces fell into, having no time or chance to stop and save themselves.

Startled by the earth suddenly trembling, the flood of sunlight washing over them as the unnatural cloud cover was broken, the pair of civilians found themselves sliding off the back of the tiger as he came to a halt. Whiteblaze turned, regarding the fissure with a contemplative gaze and rumbled a greeting at the familiar sound of chimes. The Ancient approached them, and he smiled at them wearily.

"The power's back on," Yulie exclaimed, his head snapping around to take on the life restored to this section of the city. "How did...?"

"You did it, when you made that?" Mia inquired of the warrior-monk, gesturing to the deep split in the city pavement.

"Indeed, young Scholar," Kaosu affirmed for her and his head tilted, his shadow-covered eyes regarding her. "You're going to need as much time as you can get to return the sword to young Ryo."

"Where do we look?" the auburn-haired young woman asked, frowning in confusion; she turned when she felt Yulie tap her arm.

"How about there?" He asked, pointing to the 'mountain' in the distance, which had a thick black cloud of smoke lazily rising from its peak. "That's Mt Helios. It's supposed to be dormant, right?"

Turning, she regarded the volcano in a mixture of shock and wonder; could it be? That Ryo had impacted there, stirring the long dormant volcano to wakefulness?

"You have good eyes, young one," the Ancient praised and smiled as he gestured to a familiar red SUV. "I believe you'll find that your trip will go by much faster in your vehicle."

"What about you? Aren't you coming with us?" Mia questioned.

"My place is here. I'll do what I can to keep the Dynasty forces from spreading further," the Ancient reassured her. "Go, time is of the essence."

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Location: Near Hell's Cove, Washington, USA

Date & Time: May 27, 2007, late-morning

Invasion: Day Three

A portion of their nation going off the map, obscured from viewing by satellite was unnatural and garnered the attention of the military to investigate. One of the higher ranking Generals was already in the area, going to visit family that lived in the very city in question; under the command of General Shu – he was tall for a Chinese-American and very fit for his age – the near riot that occurred in the unplanned and unorganized evacuation of the panicking city had been quickly brought under control. Lives were still lost in the confusion, from being trampled to death in the stampeding or killed as tempers flared out of control. It was he who organized the investigation and the strike force against the 'castle in the sky'. Every life lost in that failed operation, he took personal blame for.

But thankfully it took only a few hours for the colleagues he had requested had arrived, some from DC itself and a pair from near where a temporary military camp had been set up to observe Hell's Cove. All the roads leading in and out had been cleared and closed off, placed under strict military observation. It was with these close family friends, the heads of the Sanada, Date, and Hashiba families that he studied the most recent sat-feed they could access out of the dead-zone.

"So the legends are true," Rin Sanada murmured, frowning faintly as she leaned in over Takeo Date's shoulder to study the image of three humans and a familiar white tiger.

The grandmother of Ryo was a petite Japanese-American woman, her short black hair only starting to streak silver at the temples, with the lean muscular build that showed that despite her age she was still active as a kunoichi. Her garb was stark, unforgiving black, from the bottom of her jaw on down, in an outfit that merged traditional ninja-silks with modern American military body armor.

"Aaah," Takeo agreed, studying the staff and garb of the monk; it was the staff that held the silver-haired Clan Head's attention most, with its unique design. "The Ancient One himself."

Takeo, like the other Clan Heads was almost unusually fit for a man his age, something

Genchirou Hashiba had theorized might be due to the fact they had carried the armor orbs they had passed to the current generation in their youth and growing years. He forwent his normal suit for more combat-ready black military fatigues, similar to his son-in-law Mitchell; the blond man stood with Rin's only son Ken, the two pouring over the maps of Hell's Cove and the surrounding region. The pair of men were as opposite as night and day, the only thing they had in common was they were both men dressed in black -- Ken only just above average height for a Japanese man, with his black hair pulled back in a loose tail at the nape of his neck, his garb in a style much like his mother's own, while Mitchell was a tall man with golden blonde hair trimmed short and combed back from his piercing violet eyes, his strong chin graced by a short beard.

General Shu glanced over as Yurie Date entered the tent; Takeo's only daughter nodded in greeting, a folder tucked under her arm. Like her father and husband, she wore black military fatigues, her long black hair pulled back in a braid that fell to her waist.

"We've tracked those comets from yesterday," she announced, setting the folder down by the maps; opening it, she placed a photo of a different colored streaking comet by different locations. "The closest is Mt Helios; they radiate out towards Hell's Pit, Mount Helena in the Olympic State Park, even the infamous Diablo's Current. The fifth went straight up -- according to our satellites, it's in a gradually decaying orbit around the Earth. No one's able to get a close enough look at it as all the imaging equipment seems to malfunction."

"Back to the Forging Sites," Takeo breathed. "Then the Children--"

"They're alive," Rin snapped. "Look at the size of the comets, not the size of the armor-orbs, but of bodies. The Children are probably hurt but alive if the armors sent them back to the Forging Sites."

"They'd need to return to the source of their creation, to heal their bearers," Gen agreed thoughtfully; his eyes narrowed behind his glasses as he leaned in to study the maps, before looking back at the monitor, at the Ancient and the two humans with their tiger companion. "The Ancient One seems to be entrusting those two in helping retrieve the Children."

"Then we'll do what we can as well to help them," General Shu murmured. "The roads in and out of Hell's Cove are closed; if we shift the troops, we can give them clear access to each of the four Forging Sites so they can retrieve the Children."

"Let's get to it. We can't let Outsiders know about the armors. Imagine the threats to the Children," Takeo agreed, frowning in concern.

"This is the task the Ancient has entrusted to our families for generations -- we shall not fail him or the Children. If we do, our world is lost," the Sanada kunoichi stated grimly.

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Location: Hell's Cove, Washington, USA

Date & Time: May 27, 2007, late-morning

Invasion: Day Three

It was official; this looked like the start of a very bad day.

Hanging from the chain of his kusari-gama, Shuten looked over his shoulder down to the broken wreckage of the chariots and the walking suits of armor that composed the infantry of the Dynasty. The screams of the dying horses had tapered off and he cringed a bit behind his faceplate. Anubisu and Rajura were going to be upset about that; the horses were their joint venture started back when they were the only Warlords, a way for them to find common ground, breeding mounts that would be suitable for the Warlords and even though those that were not 'suitable' were dispersed into the lower ranks, they were still quite proud of the beasts. With a sigh, the red-haired Warlord shifted, bracing a foot against the side of the chasm and sprang upwards.

Landing gracefully in a crouch atop the roof of one of the shorter buildings, he recalled the kama of his weapon to him with a flick of his wrist. Straightening, he studied the returning life of the section of the city and he grimaced at the smell of vehicle exhaust, even as he studied the skyline. A crimson brow arched at the sight of the smoking volcano. That was supposed to be inactive.

His lips curled in a wicked, knowing smirk. "There you are, Wildfire."

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Location: Mt Helios, Washington, USA

Date & Time: May 27, 2007, early-afternoon

Invasion: Day Three

He didn't know how long he'd been climbing; often he had lost his grip or the rock had crumbled beneath his fingers, sending him sliding back down several feet before having to resume his climb upwards. Ryo was certain he'd been scaling the inside of this crater for the past couple hours and he was so looking forward to getting the hell out of here – he had to find the others so they could kick the Dynasty's collected ass!

Ryo had hope though – he could see the top of the crater, the blue sky beyond it and smell the sweet, fresh air. Just a little further and he would be out of the volcano and on his way to retrieve the other four--! A relieved smile crossed his features behind his faceplate as his fingers gripped the lip of the crater. Beneath his armor, his tired muscles flexed as he pushed up, throwing an arm over the lip of the crater. His fingers dug into the rocky soil for purchase as he took in a breath of fresh air and was about to finish the climb out when an armored boot stepped into view.

It was at the same time familiar, yet not. It didn't look like any worn by the armor-bearers of his Set...

His eyes widened, lifting to see Shuten Doji standing there with a yari in hand, as the Warlord smirked down at him from behind his crimson faceplate. "Nice to see you again, boy. Worked up a bit of a sweat I see – such a pity it's all for nothing."

"Fuck," Ryo snarled under his breath; it wasn't language he normally used but right now he was so pissed off he didn't care. "Shuten Doji!"

"You seem so surprised; did you think we wouldn't know you survived? It would have been better for you if you had just given up and died down there. But we can rectify that---now!" the Warlord goaded, lashing out with a powerful thrust with his yari at the arm Ryo clung to the lip of the crater with; the crumbling rock gave way when Wildfire shifted to avoid the strike, sending him back inside the volcano with a curse.

Even as he tumbled back through the air, Ryo drew his remaining katana as he twisted his body and lashed out, driving the steel blade into the side of the crater, just under the edge leading to freedom. His armored body slammed hard into the rock-wall; a grunt of pain escaped him and his head tilted back as he glared up at the lip of the crater above him and the Warlord he knew was up there now. He heard the whistling of steel through the air, the glint of the yari's tip as it embedded in the rock wall beside his katana; leaning over the lip of the crater, jabbing ruthlessly was the Warlord in question. Pulling the pole-arm free, Shuten jabbed again and again, chipping away at the rock-wall while laughing madly.

The rock-wall was slowly beginning to crumble and he could feel the enchanted steel blade holding him up shifting in the rock, angling downward bit-by-bit. Cursing under his breath, Wildfire shifted his weight, driving the tips of his armored boots into the side of the rock-wall for stability when he heard the familiar roar of the Guardian Beast the same second it slammed into the Warlord, knocking him away from the teen under his protection. Strength surged through the Samurai Trooper and his muscles coiled beneath his armor. Springing up, he flipped gracefully through mid-air to land on the outside of the crater beside Whiteblaze, who had his other katana clamped securely in his powerful jaws.

"Whiteblaze! Good to see you again, boy," Ryo murmured gratefully as he held out his hand; the tiger dropped the katana into the teen's waiting hand and, as the Wildfire-bearer rose, stepped up beside the human with a defiant snarl to the Warlord. Gracefully Ryo spun his paired katana and smiled grimly at Shuten. "I won't be defeated by you this time, Shuten Doji."

"We'll just see about that, you impudent brat!" the Warlord snarled, spinning his yari as he lowered into a ready stance.

Crawling up over a rock formation off to the side of the pair of armored warriors were the pair who had been chosen by the Ancient to help find and unite the Samurai Troopers; Yulie's eyes lit up and he turned to Mia, his voice an excited whisper, "Mia! I see him! Ryo's alright!"

"Careful, Yulie!" She cautioned the pre-teen, grabbing the back of his jean-shorts' waistband and tugging him down out of harm's way.

Ryo's head snapped towards the pair's voices. "Mia! Yulie! You're alright!"

"Ryo!" Mia called out the warning as Shuten Doji moved in a blur as he lunged for the distracted Trooper.

The raven-haired teen's attention was back on his opponent and he brought his swords up, barely blocking the rapid blurs as the Warlord struck at him repeatedly with vicious jabs from the yari. Metal clanged and screeched against metal as the weapons wielded by both samurai blurred clashed in rapid blurs; the Trooper's teeth were gritted as he tried to focus on the fact he had to keep his footing steady and fend off those ruthless jabs and thrusts from the Warlord's yari. Baring his teeth behind his faceplate, the younger Samurai found himself struggling to keep his footing, the rocks crumbling as he was driven back near the lip of the crater.

A powerful jab from the yari caused him to twist his upper body, his weight shifting abruptly; the ground gave way beneath him and he tumbled backwards, flailing in surprise. Sensing victory, Shuten lashed out, catching him with the side of the yari to launch him back into the volcano. The screams of the civilian pair mingled with Ryo's own shout of "Daaaammmmiiiiittttttt----!"

The red-armored teen fell back into the volcano he had so laboriously climbed from, disappearing from the Warlord's keen eyesight. Shuten peered down into the crater and laughed over the wail of distress from the scholar and the preteen behind him, "Well that takes care of the brat."

Whiteblaze roared, glaring down into the crater as he urged his cub to return, to finish the fight; the black and white tail of the Guardian Beast lashed to and fro in agitation and he turned his eyes to the laughing Warlord, baring his massive canine teeth – arrogant fool, thinking he'd killed the cub!

Faintly at first, the ground began to tremble, a tremble that grew into a violent shaking that startled the Warlord from his mad laughter.

"What?" Yulie murmured, stumbling and catching onto a rock outcropping. "What the hell is going on?"

"I don't know, Yulie," Mia gasped fighting to keep her balance. Beyond them the crater glowed.

The Warlord snorted at the pair's questions and smirked confidently; with the training he'd undergone, he could handle anything! "It's nothing I can't control."

He threw up a hand before his face to shield his sensitive eyes from the bright glow as magma spewed upward from the crater. The Warlord shifted and within the magma he could feel it, the armor of the Wildfire. Lips pulling back in a savage snarl he spat, "Impudent brat! If you refuse to just give up, then prepare to die!"

"Sorry, that's just not on my agenda today!" Ryo retorted as he sprang from the

magma spray at the Warlord; faintly he could hear Yulie's whoop of joy cheering him on – as it was, the most he could hear was the pulsing roar of the magma, the volcano. He landed a couple feet away from the Warlord of Cruelty and steam immediately rose, wafting around him, hissing loudly as he crossed his blades before him.

"Wow..." Yulie breathed, watching the Trooper engage the Warlord in a display of speed and power; it was like Ryo had gained a boost somehow. "Mia, look at him! It's like--"

--like the volcano's given him a boost in strength," Mia murmured, completing the preteen's thought, nodding in agreement as she speculated, "Ryo's armor is the Wildfire and the volcano's immense heat may have given him the boost he needs right now to take that Warlord down."

"I hope it works," the boy muttered.

"From the legends my grandfather and I have studied, this is like something described in them. Right now, this is our only hope."

Shuten eyed the teen before him warily, at the steam that rose about him where super-heated metal boots touched the soil outside the lip of the volcano's crater. Snarling wordlessly, he lunged forward once more, jabbing out ruthlessly with the yari; the Trooper's katana lashed out and with surprising force disarmed the older Samurai. The yari landed tip first into the soil several feet behind Shuten.

"Don't think so," Ryo growled, his blades crossing before him once more.

The Warlord eyed his yari, a frown forming behind his faceplate. 'What is this? It's like he's grown stronger somehow,' Shuten thought as his eyes slid back to observe his young foe, spinning the spiked weight of his kusari-gama. 'No matter.'

Shuten lashed out with the spiked end and the Trooper reacted automatically, swatting the chain aside. Even as the younger Samurai did so, the Warlord stepped back, reaching behind him and retrieving the yari in a blur of movement. With a feline snarl, he lunged forward with a vicious spear-thrust to the exposed portion of the Trooper's throat; the yari tip clanged against the katana blades, trapped as the teen snagged it in a scissoring motion. Golden energy gleamed where their weapons were tangled together before exploding outwards. The blades of the paired katana in the Trooper's hands gleamed with power before steam rose rapidly up in a veil between the dueling Samurai.

Ryo growled, a low feral sound that rumbled in his throat before he twisted his blades, pushing out with all his strength--

--and the blade of the yari shattered, the tip falling to embed in the ground by Ryo's armored foot. Surprised by the sudden boost in strength, Shuten had leapt back for distance and now looked between the ruined weapon he held and the teen with calculating green eyes. Behind him, he could hear the preteen's exclamation of awed surprise.

"Holy shit, didya see that?!" Yulie crowed, grinning in satisfaction while the Warlord tossed the broken yari aside and lifted his kusari-gama. "Ryo's gonna kick that demon's ass all over this mountain!"

'Kick my ass? As if, little boy,' Shuten thought to himself at the boy's words, fighting back the urge to snort as he began to spin the weighted end of his kusari-gama again. 'This Trooper will just have to face my full strength. A pity I have to do so, but maybe I've found a worthy opponent at long last...'

'What... What the hell is happening to me? It's like...like I'm burning, like I'm on fire from inside out,' Ryo thought; everything seemed hyper-aware to him, from the scents in the air to the faint whistle of the spiked weight of the Warlord's kusari-gama as it sliced through the air. 'And yet, I've never felt so strong, so powerful...'

The Warlord crouched and sprang upwards in the air; red lightning flashed against the dark clouds and Ryo tensed at the sight, knowing it must be that attack again.

"QUAKE WITH FEAR!"

The spiked end arced gracefully, gleaming with malevolent crimson light as it impacted against Ryo's chest-plate; energy began to explode outward as the chains multiplied. Shuten was almost back on the ground, a smug smirk forming when the teen's blades suddenly lashed out, batting the forming chains away, sending them right back at the Warlord.

"---what?!" Shuten yelled in shock as the chains formed, wrapping around him and knocking him off balance enough to slam into a pile of rocks. Never in his centuries of life had this happened---! Oh sure, Anubisu could catch the chains, but send them back to ensnare him?!

Ryo stalked forward, steam rising up with every step he took. The teen's eyes seemed to blaze like blue flame as he adjusted his grip on the hilts of his paired katana. "Had enough? Or are you wanting more?"

Shuten growled in his throat, his eyes narrowed as he shifted, the chains of his kusari-gama loosening. 'Of course... The Wildfire armor, its drawing strength from this volcano like mine draws strength from the season of Spring!'

The younger Samurai charged forward and the Warlord tensed before springing up, gracefully flipping over the younger warrior's head. Twisting mid-air he landed in a crouch on a rocky outcropping over where the pair of civilians had taken cover. The Scholar cried out in surprise, pulling the preteen behind her as the Warlord's large shadow fell over them. A harsh chuckle escaped him as he eyed the pair of potential hostages.

"You bastard! Get away from them!" Ryo roared, stalking towards the Warlord angrily.

'This...is not good, its like the Warlord knows about how Ryo's armor gained the boost

in strength...' Mia thought, biting her lower lip as she pulled the preteen further away from the looming figure of the Warlord; she turned, pushing the long-haired boy. "Yulie...run!"

"But--!" the boy protested, glaring back at the Warlord.

"Run!" She urged, grabbing his wrist. "We're just in the way!"

Convinced, he darted along side her and Shuten's mocking laughter put Yulie's teeth on edge. Dammit! Running away like a coward! It really grated--

"I didn't say you could leave!" He called out after the fleeing pair, lashing out with the spiked weight of the kusari-gama expertly; it wrapped around the pair, chaining them together at the waist.

"No!" Ryo snarled and Whiteblaze roared, lunging and chomping down on the Warlord's forearm guard.

"Damn you! Get off!" He snapped in annoyance, shaking his arm to loosen the powerful jaws of the Guardian Beast. With a faint grunt, he dislodged the tiger's hold, throwing the tiger into a nearby pile of rocks.

"Whiteblaze!" The young Samurai darted forward to attack even as the Warlord yanked, pulling the pair of civilians to him, using them as a human shield. Ryo skidded to a halt, eyeing the kama of the older Samurai's weapon, the deadly point hovering at the vulnerable underside of Yulie's jaw. Jaw clenching, the teen growled. "Let them go."

"I'll make you a deal, brat. I'll let them go, but only if you surrender!" Shuten taunted, grinning malevolently behind his faceplate; if he was right – and he probably was, given the heat he himself had felt – then the unprotected pair of civilians would get quite the dose of the heat emanating from the boy's armor, enough to make him surrender or retreat to keep from hurting them.

--and Anubisu was so going to kick his ass later for this stunt, Shuten just knew it.

"As if," he snorted, lunging forward in a blur of speed and lashing out with his paired swords while Shuten shifted his weight, bringing the kama up to block the attack. Steam rose as the steel of both weapons visibly grew red-hot and distorted waves of heat emanated between them; Yulie could feel the sweat beading and trickling down his neck and face.

"Holy shit, it's hot!" Yulie growled, squirming in the rapidly heating chain that bound him to the Scholar.

Ryo's eyes flickered down at the boy's words and noticing the sweat gleaming on both their faces; he sprang back, landing in a loose crouch. Behind his face-plate he frowned, his mind racing. 'What? My armor, it must be scorching hot, like the power that's burning inside me...'

"Problem, Wildfire?" Shuten asked, chuckling nastily and smirking behind his faceplate, "I thought you were all ready to fight me, boy."

'With my armor like this, if I get too close to Mia and Yulie, the heat coming off my armor could end up burning them alive!' the younger Samurai realized, his mind racing as he tried to figure out a better way to save them...but time was running out, that Warlord could slash their throats or throw them into the volcano any second--!

"Ryo, don't worry about me, get Yulie out of here!" Mia called to the younger teen, struggling futilely in the chains to loosen them; she felt the armored fingers of the Warlord dig warningly into the soft flesh of her shoulder through her light-weight cotton blouse.

"And leave you alone with this demon?! Are you insane?" Yulie snapped at her and turned his eyes to Ryo. "Mia's more important than a kid like me, she knows what's what -- do what you gotta do!"

"This fight's between you and me, Warlord, so why don't you stop hiding behind them and face me!"

A nasty chuckle escaped the Warlord, "Well have it your way -- I'll just bring them to you!"

Ryo's teeth ground together as the Warlord forced the captive pair forward; unwilling to expose them to the deadly heat of his armor, he began to surrender ground, backing away until the ground crumbled beneath his heel. Glancing swiftly over his shoulder, he found himself at the lip of the crater once more. Damn, this was not good, but he needed to get the pair free without accidentally killing them!

"It appears you've no where else to run," Shuten Doji noted snidely.

"Perhaps," Ryo agreed, bring his swords up, crossing them before him. "But you're dead wrong if you think I've lost the will to fight. Now let them go and fight me, man to man."

"Why not? But first things first!"

With a laugh, the Warlord suddenly shoved hard on the Scholar's shoulder, launching her and the preteen into the air before plummeting into the crater. In the back of Shuten's mind he heard a wolf-like snarling and suppressed a cringe; if he could hear the old man over the telepathic bond the four shared all the way here, ohh yes, the Wolven Warlord was so pissed off at him right now...

"Ryo!" Yulie screamed, his voicing mingling with the panicked shriek of Mia.

Without hesitation the younger Samurai dove into the crater after them; as he descended though, he recalled the heat his armor produced. 'I can't touch them in this. My subarmor should be more bearable for them to touch -- at least, I hope so!' he

concluded and with a fervent prayer to whatever deities were listening, shed his full armor in a flurry of petal-like energy, his subarmor gleaming in the latent light of the magma below.

"Mia! Yulie! Hang on!" He shouted, pulling his arms in tighter to increase the aerodynamic profile of his falling body; he gained on the swiftly and threw his arms out, wrapping a strong arm around each civilian's waist.

Immediately he forced his weight to the side, spinning them rapidly until his feet slammed into the side of the crater's wall with enough force to rebound them upwards. Spring boarding between the rocky outcroppings on the walls, the Trooper carried the pair upwards swiftly. Clearing the lip of the crater for what he hoped to be the final time, he landed heavily on his feet on the opposite side where the Warlord stood before falling to his knees, his grip loosing on them. Mia slid free to land heavily on her side and she watched in amusement as Yulie suddenly clung to the Trooper's neck.

"Thankyouthankyouthankyou!" He chanted over and over again, kissing the older boy on the cheek. "You're the best! I thought we were going to die down there but then you were there and---!"

The Trooper laughed slightly, ruffling the younger boy's hair. "Its alright, I understand. Now, you two need to scram, okay? I don't want him to catch you again..."

"R-right!" Yulie pulled back, blushing hotly while scrambling to his feet beside Mia. "We'll be waiting at the foot of the mountain, Mia's got her SUV and---"

The boy's words were cut off when the weighted end of the Warlord's kusari-gama sliced through the air from the other side of the volcano's crater and wrapped the chain around Ryo's throat and torso. Gagging in surprise, the Trooper grabbed the chain across his throat with his free hand, trying to pull it off him when he was yanked off his feet, soaring over the crater to land hard at Shuten Doji's feet. The air whooshed from his lungs and he took a desperate wheezing breath as he struggled to get back to his feet; to be taken by surprise like that---!

"Did you really think it'd be that easy, brat?!" Shuten snorted contemptuously.

A foot connected hard into his midsection, a blow he felt even with the protection of his subarmor and the chain fell free, releasing him. The air was forced from his lungs as his diaphragm forcibly contracted right before a spiked elbow descended. On sheer trained reflex he was moving before it could connect with the intended target of right between his shoulder blades. Instead the attack was a glancing blow on his shoulder and pain lanced from his shoulder as he felt the joint forcibly dislocated from the impact and the fleshy part of his shoulder gouged where the spike had pierced his subarmor. Taking a careful breath, Ryo was backing away to give himself room to maneuver.

Clenching his jaw, the dark-haired teen gripped his bicep and with a painful sound of bone scrapping bone, forced his shoulder back into joint, with only a minor grimace on

his face even as blood flowed more freely from the sudden aggravation of his shoulder's wound. Shuten had to admit, he was begrudgingly impressed by the pain tolerance and aptitude the Trooper was displaying; really it was almost like he trained as a shinobi...

Eyes narrowing in thought, he watched the movements of his opponent more carefully before concluding with certainty that yes, the boy was trained not as a samurai but as a ninja. And Shuten knew this for one very important reason; Anubisu had them all cross-train in the shinobi arts so that they could know how to fight against potential assassins. It had been a very successful strategy too.

"Nothing in life worth having comes easily," Ryo said through gritted teeth, quoting his grandmother as he rubbed at his shoulder, feeling the slickness of metal against blood.

"You know, without that armor, you're quite pathetic, downright pitiful really. Look at you, so wounded as you are, not compared to how you were before!"

The Warlord's observation was mocking and set Ryo's teeth on edge. He growled under his breath, the heat of his anger mingling with that burning power still coiled within his gut. His hands flexed as he tensed; the smirk he could barely see, the sheer confidence in the body language of his opponent made the Sanada teen wary. What was he up to?

Shuten moved in a blur, launching the spiked weight and Ryo barely had time to bring his forearms up in a cross-block before him. The chain coiled around his forearms and he was jerked forward, pain shooting up his arms and shoulders right before the Warlord's knee slammed into his abdomen. Ryo's body curled automatically with the blow to lessen the damage and in the same movement, he drew his bound hands up against his chest; his body twisted as his elbow lashed out, slamming into the crimson faceplate.

Metal gouged against metal with a high-pitched screech that made Shuten's ears ache and his grip loosen. Immediately the Trooper took advantage, rolling away and out of the older man's range. The ground crumbled ominously beneath his heels and with a quick glance over his shoulder to the Volcano behind him, Ryo made note of how close they were to the edge. A feral grin crossed his face as he regarded the Warlord, who was shaking his head to clear away the deafening ringing of his ears.

"You brat! I'll kill you!" Shuten shouted, pressing a hand to the side of his helm over where his ear was.

"Maybe," Ryo growled, moving slowly in a slight crouch as he circled outside of the Warlord's arm-length. "But if I die here, I'm taking you with me!"

Moving in a blur of crimson and white, the Trooper tackled the Warlord, locking his arms around the older man, over Shuten's arms to keep him from moving as they fell into the volcano. Shuten yowled in outrage, struggling in Ryo's grip; the air whipped around them as they fell headfirst towards the bubbling lava below. Shifting, twisting,

the spike on the Warlord's elbow guard gouged painfully into his young opponent's gut. Ryo's grip loosened and the red-haired man twisted out of his grip, slamming a foot into Wildfire's chest.

The chain of the kusari-gama seemed to move on it's own, coiling in the air around it's master before Shuten gripped the hilt of the kama end and with a spin, released it, launching the curved blade. The weapon embedded into the volcano's wall and halted the Warlord's descent; he grinned in triumph as his young enemy continued to fall, a grin that turned to a snarl when Wildfire suddenly spun, using the momentum to reorient himself and land on a rocky outcropping protruding from the volcano wall.

The teen glared up at him with eyes gleaming like blue flames and Shuten swore virulently under his breath before scaling up the chain onto an outcropping above. Dammit, he was to bring the brat back alive but so far that didn't seem possible! The rock beneath him trembled as the volcano rumbled ominously, bringing his attention back to the deathtrap that surrounded him. If it wasn't for his armor, he'd be dead long before now in this environment, from the heat to the toxic fumes.

A spout of lava shot up past where the Warlord was perched and he leaned back, his head tilting back to look at the distance back to the top; not enough time to climb up, because this volcano seemed ready to erupt in mere seconds. The cracking of rock and falling of debris caught his attention...and gave him an idea. A wicked grin crossed his face before he looked to see that Wildfire was bouncing his way back up the crumbling sides of the volcano.

"Too hot in here for my liking – time to make an exit," Shuten muttered, turning and lashing out with the tip of his kama. The blade embedded into the rock face above him; rock splintered in a rough oval shape and a chunk of the wall fell down into the churning lava. Leaping down onto it, he eyed the rate the lava ate away the stone before grinning viscously at his young opponent, who was looking over his shoulder at the Warlord.

The volcano rumbled and the rock he was crouched on jerked back and forth before shooting up under the pressure of another lava spout. Shuten dug armored claws into the rock for stability and faintly he heard over the roaring of the volcano Wildfire's voice.

"Oh hell no!" The Trooper swore; turning, he pulled his hand free and bracing himself. As he sprang at the ascending chunk of rock through the wall of magma, he summoned his armor to him. "Armor of Wildfire – Dao Jin!"

In the span of the seconds it had taken him to leave the rock wall and shoot through the flow of magma, then rock itself, his armor had formed. Shuten jerked back as part of the rock wall he rode on shattered and there stood the defiant younger samurai, a katana in each hand. "I don't think so!"

Wildfire lashed out with one sword, which the Warlord countered with the kama of his own weapon, blocking with the hilt just beneath the curved blade; the chain rattled as Shuten caught the other katana. The blade hummed, vibrating with power before

breaking the chain of the Warlord's weapon. Swearing, Shuten twisted his body as the blade sliced downwards, the tip catching and gouging part of his shoulder guard.

Springing back, he found the determined teen pursued him doggedly with swift, viscous strikes. Mindful of the precious little amount of maneuvering room that was steadily shrinking as the lava ate away at the rock, he found himself on the defensive, blocking repeatedly with the kama. 'Not good, not good. This environment is giving him strength and seemed to be sending him closer to a berserker state. In these close-quarters, there's not much I can do!' Shuten thought to himself grimly before eyeing the rim of the volcano crater; certainly he could just teleport away but he didn't want to go back empty handed...!

"Just give it up, brat!" Shuten growled from between clenched teeth.

"Not happening. This time, you lose!" the Trooper snarled. "You're going to be as totaled as your kama since you can't use that attack with your chain broken!"

The paired katana thrummed with power and steam hissed off both blades before the kama shattered under the intense heat. Shuten didn't even have time to try and dodge as the paired weapon sliced down full force in an X formation directly over his breastplate. The enhanced strike sent him staggering back and the high kick that followed launched him off the shrinking rock.

The long dormant Mt Helios erupted violently, spewing molten lava high into the air, thick angry black smoke churning and stark even against the grey clouds overhead. Part of the crater collapsed, sending a flow of magma down the side of the volcano away from where Mia, Yulie, and Whiteblaze were...and away from the small town at the base of the volcano, thankfully.

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Location: Arago's Castle, Dynasty, Youjakai

Date & Time: May 27, 2007, mid-afternoon

Invasion: Day Three

He hurt, his subarmor was scorched, blackened from soot and his hair was singed making the ends jaggedly uneven. Humiliated by his defeat, he was on a knee with his head bowed to the spectral image of his Master.

"Shuten. Of all your centuries of service this has been the first time you have ever failed me." Arago's voice boomed, echoing his defeat in the throne room. The flickering light of the four candles, the quietness in the back of his mind was unnerving.

"Yes, Master," he murmured; from the corner of his eye he could see the other Warlords standing there, observing him; the fact they weren't even speaking to him over their armor-induced telepathic link disturbed him greatly.

"I underestimated the power of the Wildfire armor, the skill and determination of the

bearer. With he as a prime example this shows the other four will be certain to return to the fight. You must tread carefully. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master." The silence from the other Warlords after the ghostly helm had vanished was driving him crazy. He stood and even when they still said nothing, he whirled on them. "Spit it out already, you were right I was overconfident and I got my ass handed to me for it!"

"We don't have to say anything – you've beaten yourself up over it quite nicely," Rajura said blandly.

"You've survived this defeat, so the question will be now, have you learned from your mistakes?" Anubisu asked.

Shuten hung his head and sighed. "...we really can't just kill them? It'd be easier--!"

"If they die before being brought here, the armors will go dormant and back into hiding, you know that. We have to take them alive and with doing as little damage to the armors as we can," the eldest reminded him.

Shuten sighed noisily. "Just lovely..."

"I'll tell you what's lovely," Naaza said blandly and when he had the other three's attention grinned wickedly. "The look on Kay-chan's face when I tell her that you need a hair cut!"

"No!" the red-head protested. "C'mon, 'Za, haven't I had a bad enough day?!"

"Not just yet!" the Serpent quipped as he vanished from the throne room, his candle extinguishing.

"Aww dammit!" the feline groaned, his shoulders slumping as the room echoed with the older men's chuckling. He sighed and lifted his head, regarding the older pair of Warlords. "...I'm sorry."

Anubisu looked at the youngest of the quartet in surprise. "For being defeated? Yes, you were overconfident but it's alright, you survived..."

"Not about that. I mean...about the horses..." Shuten said softly, rubbing the back of his neck and grimaced as he further ground soot into his hair.

The pair exchanged a glance of understanding and Anubisu reached out and clasped the red-head's shoulder. "That's not your fault; it was an ambush by the Ancient, there was nothing you could have done in time."

"So instead of worrying about what you couldn't avoid, perhaps you should worry about Kay-chan dying your hair bright orange or pink?" Rajura deadpanned and couldn't conceal his grin at the feline's panicking.

"Shit, I have to find a place to hide now!" The red-head said in terror before vanishing.

As his candle guttered out, the other two vanished as well to leave the throne room in darkness.

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Location: Mt Helios, Washington, USA

Date & Time: May 27, 2007, late-afternoon

Invasion: Day Three

They had worried they'd have to travel to where the magma had pooled to find him, but he had come running to them in his subarmor, encouraged by Whiteblaze's roars. Reunited with the pair of civilians and guardian beast, he paused to look back at Mt Helios.

"I won this battle but we won't be lucky every time. We need to find the others if we're to win this war," he said softly.

"They're alive, just out there somewhere like you were here. We'll find them, don't worry," Mia reassured him as she walked towards where her SUV was parked and waiting.

"And when we do, they'll be just as ready to kick ass as you were," Yulie agreed. "Then Arago and the rest of them won't know what hit 'em!"

Whiteblaze roared his agreement before nudging his cub towards the SUV; certainly after that, he'd need to rest!