

## **The Ghosts I Leave Behind**

Coming home; there was no feeling like it, nothing compared to that instinctual sense of returning to where one felt like they truly belonged. That's exactly how Sergeant Takumi felt as he and his fellow soldiers waited impatiently on their small transport ship to make its final approach to the airbase just outside the bustling city of Shanghai.

His heart surged as he felt them finally descend downward, it was about damn time too, despite only being ten minutes at the most, it felt like they had been in a holding pattern above the base for an age. He took a quick glance around the ship's passenger bay at his men.

Most seemed as content and as excited as he was but there was also a faint undercurrent of nervousness. That was to be expected however, they had been away on deployment for over a year and it was a long time to be away from home and family. And for the first timers, well they would be in for a shock at how much could change on the homefront within that time.

Takumi however held no such worries, this was his sixth time returning home under such circumstances and he knew his family would be eagerly awaiting him at their apartment. No doubt ready to pounce on him as soon as he set foot through the door. He grinned openly at the thought.

His pleasant dreams of the future however were forced from his mind by an elbow nudging into his ribs. The friendly strike back into reality was delivered from his comrade Sergeant Wang, who sat directly beside him.

The two had known each other since basic training and had luckily managed to remain in the same unit for the entirety of their careers. They had been through so much together and in that time that they had come to regard each other as brothers. Even to the point that both them and their respective families resided on the same floor in one of the residential tower blocks within the city.

"Hey." Wang grumbled. "Cleanse your mind of those carnal thoughts brother. With all the unloading we've got to do, the only thing we're going to be fit for when we get home is a good night's sleep in our own beds.

Takumi sighed disappointedly. "I thought that's why we had these guys." He said, nudging his head towards the Corporals and Privates in the platoon.

"Remember, we lead from the front. On and off the battlefield." Wang leaned back against the headrest and closed his eyes. "Besides, after a long night next to your snoring, comatose heap of a body, Li Jing will want you on the next deployment off world."

Takumi laughed, knowing that Wang was completely right. "Well we can't all have an infinite supply of strength like you do."

"It's not infinite, but my hatred of surrender is." Wang said confidently. Either way Wang was a giant amongst most men, built like a bear with the temperament of a monk.

"Amen to that." Takumi said and they unconsciously bumped their fists without thinking.

They both fell into silence, listening passively to the constant hum of the ship's engines and the jovial chatter of the men. They knew it shouldn't be too long until they landed.

Then a deep rumble could be heard above the whine of the transport ship's engines. But it was nothing that would normally alarm them.

"Perhaps home is going to greet us with thunder." Wang pointed out.

"I'd rather not be greeted by hours of torrential rain if we're going to be stuck hauling gear off the ship." But just as Takumi said that he couldn't help but notice that the sound of thunder never ceased, in fact it was increasing in volume.

Then they could both feel it through the ship, through their spines and their legs. It was a rumbling vibration that swiftly grew into a violent juddering, the ship could be felt tilting hard to the side which put everyone on the ship in a state of immediate panic. Were they about to crash?

"That isn't thunder." Takumi said loudly. "Everyone strap up tight!"

Eyes flashed open wide and voices raised all around the deck with hopeless, frightened questions as the yellow warning lights began to twirl around the deck, illuminating scared young faces with yellow strobes of alarm.

The ship's intercom came alive with the voice of the pilot, who sounded as confused as he did startled.

“Something's coming down hard from orbit, it's gonna hit downtown.” He paused briefly but the comm line was still open. “Holy shit. Brace for impact!”

Takumi's hands dug tightly into the leather of his flight seat and for the brief moment of silence that followed he thought of his family. His life mattered naught so long as they lived.

But that was the thought of a mere ant as the world screamed in agony, in that singular flash of time it felt like god had struck the Earth with the hammer that shaped the mountains.

In the next few seconds that followed it felt like the entire ship was going to shake apart into brittle fragmented pieces before it made landfall. Takumi couldn't open his eyes, he didn't want to see the end. If he was to die, he wanted to die picturing Li Jing and his boys. He wanted nothing more than to hold them again.

He felt Wang's hand grip his own and above all the audible chaos he heard his brother grunt in pain, he needed him.

He turned to look at Wang and saw a twisted piece of steel protruding from his left shoulder, blood wasn't so much pouring downwards from the wound as it was free floating. Were they in an uncontrolled descent?

Takumi glanced around him just in time to catch something hurtling towards him, he couldn't have done anything in time if he even wanted to and the swift blur struck him in the head, knocking him unconscious.

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“Sir! Sir! C'mon wake up.” Takumi heard a voice say, it sounded as if the voice's owner was submerged underwater, screaming to pierce the veil of his

subconscious. Before the world greeted him however the pain flared up in his head like a giant bell was ringing silently against the inside of his skull.

He could feel the air in his lungs as he groaned loudly.

“Sergeant Wang! I think he’s waking up.” The voice said again, it was somewhat clearer but not entirely.

Slowly, in brief flashes the events of the flight came back to him, coinciding with multiple aches and pains all throughout his body, but nothing beat the agony in his head.

“C’mon Tao! Wake up!” Strong hands gripped into his shoulders as their owner tried to jostle him awake. He opened his eyes but they failed to focus as he gazed deliriously upwards. He couldn’t focus on the man who was trying to rouse him but he could see the sky above him. It was black, it didn’t make any sense, it couldn’t have been nightfall yet. A weak smell of smoke breezed past his nostrils.

“Tao wake the fuck up, we need to get home. They’re in danger, Li Jing is in danger, your boys are in danger.” The voice shouted at him.

The mere mention of his family acted better than any shock ever could and he heaved his torso upwards, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he groaned and panted in alarm.

His eyes regained their focus quickly and were greeted by disaster as he stared into the distant cityscape of downtown Shanghai. At least what smouldering ruins remained of it.

He thought he was hallucinating and then he remembered the sound, that god awful sound of the world being hammered. Pillars of black smoke the width of starships billowed up into the heavens from all over the city. What clouds resided up there were swiftly consumed by the blackness as it spread over the sky, enshrouding the region in an ominous storm-like shadow.

The lump of fear in Takumi’s throat was so wide it threatened to choke him back into unconsciousness once more as he struggled to absorb the sight that greeted him. The people he loved more than life were amongst that. He

couldn't form words, all that left his mouth was a weak form of a pained scream.

Wang who was crouched beside gripped him once more. "Tao, look at me. Look at me!" The larger man barked which forced Takumi's eyes onto him. "They're alive, I'm not sure how I know it but I just know it, they have to be. We are going in there and we're going to find them. Okay?" It wasn't so much a question as it was a confirmation.

Takumi nodded and Wang swiftly hoisted him up to his feet. They took another few seconds and gazed at the disaster unfolding before their eyes. Yet despite the level of devastation it was eerily quiet.

"Sergeants." An authoritative voice said to their backs.

They turned to see their platoon leader, Lieutenant Zhu, run over to them. The deployment they had all just returned from was his first and despite doing well in both the Sergeants' eyes, he still looked to them often for guidance.

To the inexperienced this would be seen as an undesirable trait but it was exactly the mindset that a fresh officer needed; to check their ego at the door and use every tool at their disposal, especially their squad leaders' experience.

"How are you holding up?" He said as he gazed at the massive bruise forming on Takumi's cheek and Wang's now bandaged shoulder.

Takumi glanced at Wang's shoulder and finally remembered the piece of steel that was jutting from it. He wondered how long he had been unconscious.

"We'll be fine sir but with respect we both need to get into the city." Wang said.

"That's why I was coming to you." He paused, looking solemnly to the shattered city behind them. "Command has drafted our unit to help with the local authorities in the relief effort. We've got a transport crawler inbound, get any and all medical supplies we can muster and be ready to move in twenty."

Takumi shook his head, and it wasn't from trying to shake off any remaining disorientation. The Lieutenant noticed it.

“Is there a problem Sergeant?” Zhu asked.

“Yes sir, yes there fucking is.” Takumi pointed towards what was progressively beginning to look like the gateway to hell. “Both our families are in the middle of that and you want us to try and save people who are more than likely already dead, instead of finding our wives and kids.”

Takumi didn't realise but with each word spoken he took a step towards his commanding officer until they were face to face with each other. His chest was heaving again but it wasn't with sheer panic alone this time, there was a righteous anger amongst it all, boiling to the top.

Zhu put his hand on Takumi's chest gently. “I know Sergeant, I know. Preliminary damage assessment puts the worst of it in the downtown area. I can't guarantee it but your neighbourhood looks like it missed any impact.”

He leaned past Takumi to make sure he had Wang's attention. “That's all I can offer you both right now. I swear I'll get you both home to get your families out, but I need your help.” He focused once more on Takumi. “I need both of you, it's pandemonium down there.” He said, his eyes pleading to Takumi for his help.

Takumi held the Lieutenant's gaze for a few more seconds before letting out a weary sigh. “We'll get whatever medical supplies we can, at least we won't have to worry about carrying our weapons.”

Not a second later the telltale cracks of gunfire echoed from downtown.

“That can't be what I think it is.” Wang pondered. At first it was a few shots, then more came, at a faster rate, they could be heard from multiple areas around downtown. Behind them they could hear the low grumbles of their troop transport arriving.

“That's rifle fire.” Takumi observed.

“Wang. Get the men armed and loaded onto the Crawler. Whatever is going on down there, we're not going in unprepared.” Zhu said.

“Gladly sir.” Wang shouted at the platoon and they all moved away inside the ship, leaving Takumi and Zhu, who both stood in silence, listening to the echoing crackles of automatic fire.

“What the hell hit us sir?” Takumi kept feeling around his bruised face, wincing as his hand drew near his jaw.

“No one can confirm, the comm net is in chaos right now so it’s difficult to be sure, but before the impact one of the pilots heard there was an explosion aboard one of the Gatekeeper stations.” The Lieutenant replied.

Takumi took a glance at Zhu and saw the young officer’s face pale with fear and awe. Takumi winced again as he felt a tooth crack and shatter inside his mouth. He hawked and spat out white fragments and thick spurt of blood onto the concrete.

“Sir.” He tapped Zhu on the shoulder. To which the officer turned to face him, shaking himself out of a daze as he did. Takumi kept his hand on his shoulder. “We’re going in there. We don’t know what we’re going to see until we get there so don’t let your mind wander. Keep your attention on what you can control now.”

Zhu nodded. “I know Sergeant, but I cannot deny that gunfire unnerves me.”

“Whatever it is, we’ll deal with it when the time comes.” Takumi said as Wang walked over to them, hefting their weapons and chest rigs like they were lightly packed bags.

“The men are ready.” Wang said confidently. “They already know not to fire unless a threat prevents itself.” He didn’t look fazed in the slightest, he never did. Whatever problem presented itself to him, be it a mountain or an army, he simply conquered it.

“Then let’s move.” Takumi replied, gazing at his friend, he felt like runover shit and his heart was racing with apprehension but he knew that as long as he had his brother at his side, they’d see it through together.

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The ride into the city was akin to swimming upwards through strong rapids. The roads were nearly impassable at the best of times, either because of the teeming throngs of people who stood dumbfounded at the sight of the chaos in the distance, or because of the hundreds of bumper to bumper abandoned vehicles.

Thankfully, when there was simply no way past; Takumi either roared at the crowds through the Crawler's PA, or they rammed whatever vehicle was in their way.

But as they drew closer to the collapsed towers of downtown and ground zero, the air around them slowly became masked in a veil of dust and smoke. At first it was merely a filter, colouring everything in the bleakest, greyest of greys.

But as they proceeded further and further into downtown, meandering through the streets that weren't crushed under toppled buildings it turned into a dense fog of ruin that slowly stole the light from the sun above them. Stinging the eyes of any who entered and catching at the back of their throats, threatening to clog their airways if one let it.

Everyone in the Crawler could barely see twenty feet in front of them. It was an otherworldly environment as thick layers of dust coated every surface like a blanket of carcinogenic snow. Even sound was coated here, like the noise of the world outside no longer existed, only the screams of the wounded in the distance and the occasional burst of gunfire.

Occasionally they had to swerve to avoid people in the roads. They wandered silently through the dust like lost ghosts, hammered into shock by the disaster and oblivious to all that happened after that.

They had passed multiple emergency services already hard at work rescuing survivors from damaged buildings. But Takumi couldn't help shake the feeling that there was something off when he observed those they had passed by. People who were perfectly ambulatory were begging their rescuers to leave those still trapped inside the buildings and escort them out of the city.

"Sir, why are we not stopping to help these people?" One of the younger Privates asked. Takumi could see the Private's young eyes scan the streets, clearly eager to help anyone he saw.



Another burst of gunfire rang out through the ruined streets, they were getting closer to downtown.

Zhu laid his hand attentively on the Private's shoulder. "We're heading to whatever the hell is going on further downtown. We're better equipped dealing with that than we are here."

Takumi spotted that the Lieutenant was nervous, he was hiding it well for the younger men but he knew that look all too well. But at the very least it was better being nervous than complacent.

Takumi started to notice tracks in the thickly laid dust, footprints of people who had been and gone. Dozens of trails snaked across the road they travelled, but one particular track caught his eye, the footprints were noticeably too large to be left by a human.

Out of nowhere he nearly lost his footing as the Crawler came to an abrupt, emergency stop, its brakes squealing in the eerie, hollow silence permeating around them. A police officer, his navy blue uniform darkened with fresh blood, had walked out in front of the vehicle, forcing it to stop.

"Please! We need help here!" The policeman cried out desperately.

At first it was a wall of complaining noise from the squad until a single look from Wang silenced them instantly. Zhu disembarked to talk to the man and Takumi followed but he knew exactly what the policeman wanted help with.

Barely visible through the edge of the dust was a bus, or at least what was left of one, massive pieces of debris from one of the adjacent buildings were spread all around the street. But unluckily for the bus; one of those massive pieces smashed straight down on top of the front half of the bus, crushing it and the occupants unlucky enough to have avoided the back seats.

"Where do you need us?" Zhu asked.

"There are people trapped inside the bus, please we need to hurry! The power unit has caught fire." Before he even finished the sentence he was running back up the street towards the bus.

“Disembark and follow me!” Zhu rushed on forward also. Takumi shook his head, an idealistic young fool he thought. A power cell on fire could easily turn into a deadly explosive, yet he was rushing carelessly into danger when he was the commander. A rookie move that Zhu still had a bad habit of making.

Takumi finally got a look at the damage as the platoon circled the ruined vehicle and immediately he could tell they needed to back the hell away from it.

What little of the front half that was visible was already engulfed in flickering red curtains of fire as flames and black smoke rose up around the large piece of concrete that doomed it. The owners of the screaming voices inside were barely visible; the majority of the windows were stained black from the smoke that was quickly choking the people inside. Little did they realise the more they screamed the faster they were going to die.

“Help’s here!” The policeman shouted to the bus’ dying occupants. “The emergency door must be jammed, I’ve tried prying it but nothing works.”

That left the windows as the only feasible means of egress but the trouble was they were at least nine feet off the ground.

Takumi shot a look at Zhu who stood and stared wide eyed at the palms viciously hammering at the smoke stained glass, their screams were horrific to behold. He gave him two seconds.

It was two seconds too long. “Wang. Hoist me!” He stomped towards the bus alongside his larger brother.

Wang crouched down to allow Takumi onto his shoulders. “Remember. The second you smash that glass, duck. Just in case.”

“I know, I should be fine, the fire’s breathing.” Takumi said as he removed his chest rig.

“Yeah well hurry up stripping, otherwise those people won’t be.”

Takumi was convinced at times that Wang was a synth, no one should’ve been able to shift the weights he could and make it look so effortless. With

what gear he still had on him, he would be weighing at least two hundred pounds, yet Wang hoisted him up like he was a baby on his shoulders.

Without any more delay Takumi took the stock of his rifle and hammered it against the glass. He didn't even bother telling the people inside to get away from the glass, they had bigger problems.

The first strike only cracked the glass but the second drove through as the shards shattered inside and a wave of hot, choking blackness exhaled outward, enveloping Takumi's entire body and filling the insides of his lungs.

"Takumi!" He heard Wang exclaim as the smoke enveloped him.

His senses were overwhelmed, his eyes stung like they were being pierced with tiny hot needles and his airway burned as he inhaled the acrid smoke. Instinctively he leaned backward and his sense of equilibrium failed him as he fell.

Even with his prodigious strength Wang couldn't stabilise him, it took all he had just to slow down his fall as they both tumbled onto the debris-strewn pavement.

Zhu and the rest of the platoon moved forward to take over with the attempted rescue as the two Sergeants tried to recover.

"Talk to me Tao! Talk to me, little man." Wang was instantly over Takumi, lightly slapping his ash-stained cheek. A moment later Takumi launched himself up, coughing loudly as he tried to spit out the taste of smoke.

"You okay?" Wang asked, a moment later he uncapped his canteen and handed it to Takumi.

He spat out the first mouthful of water he drank in another effort to get rid of the taste but it was to no avail, another gulp later and he started pouring it over his eyes to attempt to rid them of that blinding, piercing sting.

"Yeah, I'm good." In truth however Takumi was a little rattled, it wasn't the explosion of fire that he feared but in that split second it sure as hell felt like it. He looked up to see a handful of people weakly roll out of the broken window

into the arms of his squadmates, their skin and clothes heavily stained by the smoke, their skin blistered by the heat inside.

Wang wanted to check Takumi again but he shrugged him off. "I'm fine, go, go help the others."

One of the survivors, a young, petite built woman staggered towards him from the burning bus. She was most definitely in a state of shock, he could see her hands quivering as she collapsed just behind him, gasping for breath.

One of the Privates quickly followed her and handed Takumi his chest rig before moving to sit beside her, reassuring her as he checked her over. How anyone could be reassured here was beyond Takumi's comprehension. Bodies littered the streets alongside toppled buildings, meanwhile the literal ashes of the city were lying on the streets like a sugar coated topping of desolation.

There was nothing else Takumi could do to help for now, he'd done his part, so he sat there, feeling the beginnings of yet another massive headache brewing under his forehead. His eyes still stung and he struggled to keep them open for more than a few seconds.

This was pointless, he thought. They would continuously rescue people like this until they were run ragged into the ground, and still they'd have to go on. If it was anywhere else he'd willingly do his duty until he collapsed, but not here.

His family were here, in amongst this cataclysm and if he followed his orders their safety would be entirely out of his hands. They could be dead or dying right at this moment, while he was busy risking himself for people that he'd never know.

He couldn't leave Wang here though, like his physical strength, his will and sense of duty were as immovable as a mountain.

A strange sound from behind him forced him from his internal thoughts, then a woman's piercing scream.

He twisted around to see his comrade dead on the pavement, the private's nose was gone, his eyes now a drooping mess of red and white liquid that

glooped onto the ground beside what remained of his skull. It was a massive entry wound caved deep into the centre of his face.

A few metres away he saw the young woman's eyes locked onto his as she screamed bloody murder, pleading at him as she was dragged into the dense fog by something massive and definitely not human.

"Contact! Enemy!" Takumi screamed as he scrambled himself up. "Man down!" He heard voices at his rear respond to his words but in truth they were nothing more than background noise at that moment. He sighted his rifle towards where the giant figure took the young woman but there was no sign of them, the magnified optic was more of a hindrance right now because he could barely see twenty feet in front of him.

But he could hear her, still screaming helplessly as she was dragged away towards an alleyway, her wailing cries echoing between the walls of the two buildings that formed a gateway to her own demise.

He followed the unnerving sounds down the alleyway, his weapon never leaving the high ready position as he pushed forward swiftly. His boots kicked over vast swathes of laden dust as he tracked the drag marks that presented themselves before him.

He entered into the shadow of the alleyway, his eyes alert for the slightest hint of movement as he heard a garbage can being kicked over up ahead. She had stopped screaming, but now her pleas were replaced by an airy skin-crawling hiss that breathed cold ice throughout the narrow passageway.

His heart thundered in his ears but he did his best to ignore it out of existence, he wasn't even sure if any one of his platoon were even following him. It didn't matter, he couldn't turn back. Not now with the threat that was directly ahead of him.

Through the dust he could see the silhouettes of two figures completely obscured in shadow. He knew instantly which one was which. Whatever that thing was, she was fighting it desperately, nearly breaking free of its grasp for a moment until it pulled her back into its embrace with an enraged snarl.

He finally got a reasonably good look at the mysterious figure but for a second it made him doubt his sanity. It was massive, and moved in the strangest of

ways, almost inhumanly. Not to mention there were appendages that emanated from the humanoid shape that simply didn't belong to a human being.

"Stop right there!" He barked, he dared not blink as his eyes never left his scope.

The figures stopped dead and he could feel them both watching him. "Help me." He could hear the effort from her as she tried to scream the words out but it only sounded like someone who was being choked to death.

"Let her go!" He commanded the mysterious entity. He heard the rest of his squad follow behind him down the alleyway.

"Takumi?" He could hear the Lieutenant shout his name questionly.

Another unnatural hiss sent a wave of cold hostility funnelling down the tight dank space towards them all. Takumi could feel his breath shudder in his chest as he centred his sights on the strange thing's elongated head.

It was most definitely not human. Whatever it was, it clearly had no fear of the soldiers bearing arms down upon it because he could swear he saw the glint of teeth smiling back at him.

It started to drag her away again, deeper into the dark, he wasn't going to allow it. He fired.

The gunshot echoed down the alleyway and through the silent streets in the distance outside as the thing roared and wailed. A tail could be seen waving frantically above them both while the woman let out an agonising shriek as smoke could be seen emanating upwards from her head.

Whatever it was, it threw her harshly to the ground and snarled at the soldiers as it leapt up onto the wall of the building, its appendages sticking to the surface like glue as it swiftly crawled up the wall.

"What the fuck is that thing?" One of the men behind Takumi exclaimed in disbelief.

"Weapons free. Open Fire!" Zhu ordered.

The platoon obliged and sparks could be seen scratching the surface of the wall around the massive serpentine shadow as it sped up its ascent. If any rounds connected, those responsible were none the wiser.

Takumi raced forward, his boots pounding into the dust, sending up clouds of particles as he closed in on the still screaming woman. But those screams were the noises of someone who was no longer grounded in this bleak reality, they were the noises of someone truly maddened by pain.

He was halfway to her when he saw two squirts of amber-coloured liquid descend from the haze above him, it landed a few feet ahead of him. What came a heartbeat later immediately made him dart to the left, causing him to lose his footing and cannon into a pile of trash bags.

“It’s heading towards us!” He heard someone shout. He didn’t look however as his eyes observed the smouldering craters that suddenly appeared where that liquid landed.

The smell of freshly laid tar clung to the back of his throat as he heaved himself out of the trash pile and inspected the damage done to the ground.

Swiftly aiming his rifle’s light towards it, he could see the corrosive compound had melted through the concrete, all the way down to the city’s sewer network down below. He saw a constant wave of movement down there and it wasn’t sewage.

He heard his platoon opening fire again as he bolted for the woman, she was hidden behind a dumpster, her convulsing body laying face down into a shallow puddle of god knows what.

Takumi swung his rifle on its sling onto his back and rolled her over onto her back, but as soon as he did he wished he didn’t.

“Fuck.” His shaking voice uttered as he scrambled back.

The stench of burning meat wafted against his face as he saw half her head disintegrating before his very eyes. Bones, teeth and tissue melted into her skull cavity like a steaming broth, eventually sieving through to spill out in a thick stream onto the ground and even then it didn’t stop burning.

Suddenly he heard what sounded like a gunshot to his side heading deeper into the alleyway. He turned to see a manhole cover fifteen feet away shooting up six feet into the air before crashing back down. A choir of hate could be heard rising from the foul depths.

More of those things were coming.

Instinctively he reached for where a grenade would be on his chest rig. Then he remembered it was still back by the bus, along with all of his spare ammo.

Someone was screaming in agony to his rear, it sounded like Zhu.

“Takumi! I need you here!” Wang shouted. “Get outta there!”

He got up from his knees on shaking legs as he saw the hands of demons grip the edge of the shaft. Long black digits covered in slick oil that glistened against the light.

He took aim as he rose to his feet once more and saw a horrific hybrid of giant devils, both serpentine and arachnoid arise from the man-made portal to a world made altogether inhuman and completely hostile by their presence.

Elongated heads that ended in mouths forged in the fires of hell poured out ceaselessly before Takumi’s eyes before he even made it ten paces back. Before he knew it more than five of these monsters had already fully emerged from the manhole cover and were staring at him, their teeth clattering together in anticipation. The sound was only comparable to a curtain of windchimes clattering together in the wind, chimes constructed from his very own bones.

He flicked his fire select to fully automatic and sent a burst into their midst. Some of the rounds found their marks but they didn’t put any of the things down. The rounds merely acted to disperse the group, as they ascended the walls on both sides of the alley before heading straight for Takumi.

Takumi didn’t think twice and with a thundering heart at the pit of his stomach, turned to run for his life. His boots striking against the pavement as he heard the creatures bear down on him.



Looking ahead, he was desperate to reach the safety of his platoon, until he saw the figure of Zhu lying down on the pavement, with that dreaded smoke rising from his chest. Nobody was facing him but more importantly, nobody was sending rounds downrange to the things bearing down on him.

“Help!” Takumi panted in between gasps as his lungs burned. “Shoot them!”

He saw Wang tear his face towards his direction first, then his voice bellowed outward like a wave of command and hostility.

“Contact front!” Open fire!” Wang roared. Instantly the platoon formed a line across the breadth of the alley and levelled their rifles up above Takumi’s head and fired.

Little white lights and flashes appeared from their weapons as lead wasps whistled past Takumi’s head, cracking against the surface of the buildings or occasionally sinking deep into the black flesh of these devilish things.

But as he drew closer and closer to the firing line he could surmise that they were still firing for all their worth. But more importantly he could see the look of hopelessness creep into the faces of the younger men. How many of these things were behind him? What had they just stirred up?

“Centre peel!” Wang shouted as he yanked a grenade from his vest and primed it. “Back! Back into the street!”

The soldiers at the centre of the firing line turned and ran into the street, giving Takumi an opening to sprint straight through. He sped past the line of gunfire, never turning back as he headed straight towards his chest rig that lay in the middle of the street.

Hastily he swung it over his head and tightened it as he looked on to the alleyway entrance. The air around it was obscured with the powder gases from the expelled ammunition as he saw the last of his men and Wang run out before a large explosion emanated from down the alley.

Some of his boys weren’t so lucky as two of the giant beasts pounced out from obscurity, landing on the backs of their prey like lions; smashing them into the ground harshly. None of their comrades dared to fire for fear of hitting them, but they were better off if they had done as their pitiful screams

intertwined with hideous, alien grunts while those that remained saw their comrades dragged back into the dark like helpless, paralysed gazelles.

Higher up Takumi could see more of the things climbing out of the alley, heading left and right on their respective buildings, they were moving for the flank.

“Form a circle!” Takumi ordered as Wang regrouped with him, the front of his kit was covered in blood but it wasn’t his own.

“Zhu?” Takumi asked, already dreading the answer.

“Dead.” He panted as he reloaded, the bottom of the magazine he ejected had melted away. “That thing you shot bled some sort of acid, went straight through his armour.”

Angry hisses crept out from the fog all around them, one of the men panicked and replied to the noise with a burst of gunfire.

“Don’t fire unless you have a target!” Wang shouted. “What the hell are these things?” He muttered as he primed his weapon.

“I don’t know, but they came from the underground.” Takumi said, a moment later the creatures could be heard running around their position, just outside their visual range.

“This position is untenable, the second one gets close we’re all in danger. We need to retreat and get reinforced.” Wang pointed out.

“Fuck that, if those things are in the sewers they could be all over the city, we need to get home.” Takumi tried to key in his radio to the command channel they’d been issued. The channel was completely dead.

Wang didn’t respond to that last sentence, the thought had clearly never entered his mind amongst the heat of battle but Takumi shot a glance towards him and could see the concern coat his usually stoic face.

Pounding footsteps bore down on them from directly ahead as one of the beasts charged forward with its hideously human-like hands extended outward, ready to receive a new victim.

“Here they come!” Someone shouted from behind as Takumi and Wang fired in unison at the creature in front. Rounds hammered into its screaming face as it tumbled and died a few feet in front of them.

Instinctively the both took a few steps back from the corpse and the corrosive blood leaking out from it. Guns began firing around their perimeter as more of the things probed the range of their defences.

Takumi took an instant to look down at the body in front of them. It looked unlike anything he had ever seen and yet there were elements of its form that were as eerily human as there were others that were not.

Takumi and Wang took out another two of the creatures in the next few moments. But Takumi noted that each time the bodies kept getting closer into the perimeter of the circle, forcing them back and collapsing the circle, soon the platoon would be back to back and prone to an attack that would wreak havoc on them.

“They’re squeezing us together!” Wang shouted out. Almost immediately one of the men to their left moved forward a few steps, it was brave but foolish.

And it cost him his life as one of the things came running past at a sideways trajectory with impossible speed. Smashing into him and hoisting him up with ease like a screaming child as it carried him off into the horrifying obscurity of the fog.

“Fuck!” Takumi grunted, he was the first to lay eyes on the thing that took his comrade but it was just far too fast to get a leading shot on.

Somebody at their rear collapsed onto the ground screaming and writhing in agony as Takumi inhaled that familiar scent of burning flesh. Their perimeter was being neutralised and it wasn’t going to last much longer.

“We need to move.” He called out as he wounded another of the beasts, taking out its legs from underneath it before blowing off the front half of its head as it lay screeching on the ground.

It was getting hard to breathe, it was difficult amongst all the dust in the first place but with these bodies encircling them; the caustic vapours were becoming a very real concern.

He turned his head briefly to see one of the men with a steady stream of blood emanating from his coughing mouth. Alongside him, another man was forced to fire from a kneeling position, the front region of his left boot was completely gone, the leather that remained had melted into the wound.

But despite that they both still fought, giving it their all. Takumi was proud of them. But it wouldn't be enough and he knew it. Wang knew it too but he also knew that Wang was the kind of guy that wouldn't accept defeat until his soul was at the gates of the afterlife.

The final bell tolled on their valiant defence as Takumi saw a dark shape in the corner of his eye shoot down into their midst from directly above. It crashed into the men at their back and immediately the thing launched into an explosive blur of lusting, crazed violence.

Wang forced Takumi down as a skeletal tail swung around like an elongated mace, it just caught him at the side of his face, opening up a deep wound from his cheekbone down to his jaw.

He heard the screams all around him as the demon tore into his men like a crazed tiger. Amongst the chaos and with their defensive perimeter all but ruined the others circling them closed in and began snatching away those who still lived.

Takumi felt himself being yanked back with an almighty force as his back crashed into the Earth. He was dazed for a few moments as his blinking eyes stared upward into the whirling dance of smoke and ash above as something gripped his right ankle like a vice.

It started dragging him, yanking him back towards that alley, that rubbish-filled avenue to the end. He blinked his eyes a few more times, drawing them back into focus as he leaned his head up and saw what had claimed him.

It loomed high above like a demon born from the underworld, its tail dragging heavily across the concrete beside his head like a load bearing chain. And despite the fact they had all but won the fight it wasn't being lackadaisical

about bringing its prize back. It was moving fast much to the dismay of his back, another few seconds and they'd be in the alley.

An image of his wife and kids flashed into his mind as he faced oblivion.

This thing had made one fatal mistake, his rifle was still slung to his chest. He gripped the weapon and levelled it towards the thing's shoulder.

"Hey!" He roared.

It turned its head towards him and he unloaded a substantial burst that cut through its bony shoulder joint and further on into the side of its head. The arm completely separated from the collapsing body but the hand still gripped his ankle tightly as he skittered back to avoid any spurts of caustic blood.

He heard gunfire to his rear and someone screaming, it was Wang.

Takumi's breaths came in short, terrified bursts as his fingers shakily tried to pry the dead, horrific limb from his ankle. His naked hand trembled as he touched its dead, oily skin in an effort to pry the arm free but after a few jerks he was successful and launched up to his feet, his rifle trained towards where he heard Wang.

His brother in arms was in a mirrored situation and responded similarly but he lost his rifle to the effort, which now lay next to him, melting out of existence. The creature that was attempting to take him was all but spattered over the concrete in a ten foot radius. Wang must have unloaded an entire clip into its torso, shredding it out of existence.

Their escape didn't go unnoticed as another two of the beasts charged them while the rest of their kin retreated into the alleyway, clutching what remained of the platoon as they screamed with terrified abandon.

Takumi neutralised one of the giants but as it toppled to the ground he heard that god awful dry click that signified an empty magazine. The last remaining one sprinted towards Wang who now only had his side arm to defend himself.

It wouldn't be enough.

He swiftly retreated in panic as he fired off his side arm at the charging threat, the rounds ricocheting off its armoured exoskeleton, one of which cracked off the ground next to Takumi.

Wang's back smacked against the side of the bus in the centre of the street. He was done for, that's all that went through Takumi's head as his hand fumbled trying to slip a fresh clip into his rifle's magwell. That thing was pissed and it had Wang cornered.

He heard Wang's pistol fire off an empty click, he saw him reach for his chest rig but there was no time. Deep inside a part of Takumi tried to prepare for the impossible concept of watching his brother being torn apart in front of his very eyes.

It pounced forward at blistering speed but Wang luckily timed it and dived to the side. The thing hammered its considerable weight into the side of the bus, causing a massive dent deep into the body work and chassis as Takumi chambered a round and advanced.

He planted two rounds into its back before he saw Wang in the corner of his vision wave him away. That threw him off. Why would he do that?

The answer shook the entire street as the raging creature disappeared in an explosion of noise and dust that forced Takumi onto the pavement yet again. But he was up before the plume of dust settled, his ears ringing a whining pitch as he aimed his rifle at the site of the explosion.

The beast was gone, literally just gone. Any pieces of it that weren't vaporised in the explosion would be unrecognisable and scattered around the ruined street.

Takumi's chest hurt like hell, like his lungs had just been used as punching bags as he struggled to breathe once again. His panicked eyes scanned the area around the detonation site and for the briefest of seconds Wang was nowhere to be seen.

Panic pushed him on despite the fact that all he wanted to do was sink to his knees and just stop until he could breathe again.

“Wang.” He didn’t have the power to shout, the name barely came out as a pathetic shuddered breath as he stumbled forward. His eyes still scanned his surroundings while his ears slowly recovered from the sudden deafening noise.

With a relieved heart he saw pieces of rubble shift from a pile near the site of the explosion. Takumi ran swiftly towards it as he saw it was indeed Wang. He pressed himself up, shaking pieces of scattered concrete off his body as his eyes adjusted to greeting life after just escaping almost certain death.

As Wang finally got to his feet Takumi leaned harshly onto the bus beside him. Panting as he still tried to regain the function of his lungs. “Home. We need to get home.” He breathed out weakly.

Almost on cue more gunfire and screams of pain and terror could be heard echoing through the city streets as the shadows around them grew long, signifying the coming of night.

Wang nodded, his eyes scanning their surroundings, half expecting more of those things to be surrounding them, dooming them. “We better move now, before they come back.”

Wang was once again a force of nature in Takumi’s eyes, his brother had just been a few feet from the explosion, which had covered him in rubble and yet he was in a much better state than Takumi.

They moved away from the bus, towards the site where their platoon held their last stand. Wang perused the area, checking each of the bodies of the fallen that remained.

“Here, we need the ammo.” Wang said as he delicately removed a rifle and the remaining magazines from a body unrecognisable by the obscene damage delivered to the upper torso and head.

For the next minute they consolidated their gear, filling their empty magazine pouches, checking their lights and scanning comm channels once again. Still nothing, it was as if there was no outside support at all. No one was coming to help, the world was shattered and they were on their own. It only hammered home the need to get to their families much more strongly.

“You ready to move?” Wang asked Takumi who replied with a determined nod as he racked the charging handle of his rifle.

“Then let's go.”

They both set off in the direction their home lay, leaving behind the site where they lost their men and not two minutes later dark figures began emerging from the shadows, laden with a desire for more carnage.

They made it a few blocks before life began to reveal itself in their midst, or at the very least the last dying throes of life as blood curdling screams came out the windows of the buildings surrounding them.

These things were filtering through apartment blocks like foxes in hen houses as they invaded and plucked these poor souls from their homes and their lives. The duo couldn't stop, they couldn't be bogged down, they needed to keep moving.

People screamed for help that would never come from all directions but Takumi took particular notice of a young woman leaning out the window of her apartment on the sixth floor, holding her young baby draped in a swaddle over the precipice on outstretched arms, wailing at the top of her lungs as one of those things could be heard roaring behind her.

His fatherly instinct made his heart and his body stop in its tracks as he watched the demon wrap its black, skeletal arms around her slender body and in the shock of the contact, her infant fell from her grasp and plummeted to the ground below.

“No!” Takumi groaned out loudly, he wanted to close his eyes but something in him stopped him from looking away. He watched in absolute horror as he saw the little soul being pulled down swiftly towards the Earth by gravity, its tiny lungs wailing out its fearful, primal need of its mother.

He never saw an inch of skin, the child was so well wrapped up it merely looked like a fabric covered weight as it fell through the air.

Those weak little cries were cruelly cut off by the sickening crack of tiny bones breaking off the concrete as Takumi stood in complete shock, nearly weeping



as he stared frozen at the limp little parcel of love and hope that lay broken and abandoned on the ground, possibly never to be recovered.

The memory of the infant's cries still echoed in Takumi's brain, well after the haunting silence that sank a spear of parental agony into the core of his soul.

"Takumi come on!" Wang shouted at him from a small distance ahead. Takumi caught up to him, wondering if he had at all taken notice of that small atrocity in this burning city of nightmares. But as he reached him he saw silent tears trickle down from the bigger man's eyes.

"There's nothing we can do here now." Those words choked him on their way out but Takumi knew he was right and they moved on once more, leaving countless dead in their wake.

Their pace never slowed as they moved on at a steady run through the desiccated streets, manoeuvring around rubble, disabled vehicles and countless bodies. Their lungs seared and their bodies were laden down with exhaustion but they pushed on through the near unbearable levels of pain and discomfort.

Further on the two soldiers finally encountered people running on the same streets they travelled. People clutching belongings and pulling at the slower members of their family as they fled the massacre unfolding all around them.

But as more and more people began to flood the streets, the things that hunted them moved their harvest from the buildings down to street level.

The sound of panicked cries came from their rear and the two of them twisted on their heels, training their sights on the origin of the sound. Three of the creatures were descending down from the outside wall of the building to their left, leaping down upon helpless civilians with guttural snarls of triumph.

"Takumi! up high!" Wang pointed out.

Takumi aimed his sight further up the building and saw that even more of the creatures were descending downward, at least six of them.

The civilians that remained were spurred on into the sort of running pace that could only be achieved by olympic sprinters and people running for fear of their lives.

“We won’t outrun them.” Takumi said, accepting that they had to kill these things here and now. Both Wang and himself took control of their breathing and opened fire on the descending horrors.

Two died on the wall but as their bodies fell their surviving kin dropped down alongside them to escape the onslaught of gunfire. Takumi couldn’t believe it, they each fell roughly seven storeys and yet suffered no physical injury, evidenced by their immediate and furious advance on the two soldiers and the fleeing civilians.

They leaped and bounded over abandoned vehicles like tigers towards the two warriors. But with careful precision they each downed two of the remaining creatures and with a swift, composed reload Wang roared like an animal as he gunned down a third beast.

The last remaining one dashed to the sidewalk and snuck past the duo before breaking into a full run as it bore down screaming towards a man sprinting with his son clutched to his chest.

Takumi locked eyes with the young child for the briefest of seconds. And with a snarl he rushed to get an angle and fired at their pursuer. The rounds exploded into its back as it fell to the ground screeching in agony.

They checked their rear and once they saw it was clear they continued on their journey. Takumi saw that the last creature was still alive, barely clinging to life and unable to move as they passed by it. He spat at it in disgust and inwardly cursed whatever hell these things came from.

But no matter how far they ran, it was always the same. The very city anguished audibly in horror and agony as its citizens were under siege from a horde of demons from the dark below.

And with every street they passed the duo’s concern for their respective families grew, would they arrive too late only to find the bloodstained remnants of their homes and their families gone? Or would they see their wives throw

their children from the windows to the streets below, just to save them from a surely worser fate.

Eventually they made it to within a few blocks from their habitation tower, close enough that they could see it. The streets were in absolute chaos as people ran for their very lives.

Takumi looked up the street and could see those things crawling all over the walls of the buildings. Their swift black forms barely visible in the dark as they divided and conquered. Smashing into apartment windows and snatching people away, emerging moments later with some poor soul locked under the strength of one arm as they descended the wall with their prize screaming in tow. Only for the beasts to disappear down an alleyway and assumedly into the underground sewer network below.

That's when he realised. They weren't committed to absolute slaughter, although they certainly were beyond capable of it when presented with a threat. No, these things were collecting people, plucking them from their lives like ripe apples from a tree.

"Oh god." Wang gasped as he pointed his shaking hand towards their apartment building. "They're already there."

The pair sprinted as fast as they possibly could, their hearts hammering in absolute fear of the lives of their kin. Ignorant to those fleeing around them as they indiscreetly barged through and past the crowds.

Cries of help rang out around them unanswered but Takumi and Wang weren't here for them. The only noises their ears were alert for was the unnatural cries of these monsters moving in on the two of them for the kill. But that assault never came, these things were too busy with the harvest of defenceless meat.

They skidded to a halt outside their building as they saw a few of the beasts dragging people out of the entrance. Takumi tried to identify who their bounty was, for all he knew they were hauling out his boys to be taken down below to meet a horrible end.

"Hey!" Wang roared challengingly at the creatures and simultaneously their elongated heads snapped up in the soldiers' direction. Their glistening teeth

chattering together as they snarled menacingly at them while the people in their arms whimpered and pleaded in vain.

Takumi's eyes glanced over the people in their arms in that split second of confrontation, he didn't recognise any of them. But he also knew Wang wouldn't open fire in case he hit the civilians and they didn't have time for that. They needed through that entrance and so they needed those things gone.

He sighted his rifle and opened fire at the group.

Of the five creatures he fired upon, he killed one and wounded two more in that first burst of gunfire but he also shot one of the civilians, an elderly woman, directly in the abdomen.

All the surviving creatures bar one dispersed as soon as the rounds landed, their priorities were the living prizes they clutched to themselves as they fled. The one that remained however dropped the woman that Takumi shot harshly onto the pavement like a trash bag, standing above her as she cried out in terrible pain.

Takumi had seen that kind of injury before, gut shots like that were a fatal but slow wound and the thing carrying her was somehow aware of that, and it was pissed.

The beast had one of its taloned feet pressed over the side of the woman's head as she continued to audibly vent her pain, while its mouth opened wide in a heart-shuddering roar as copious amounts of saliva dripped from its fangs.

Her screams grew impossibly louder as it pressed its weight down until eventually her skull gave into the pressure and cracked like an egg. That sickening sound ended the screams as the contents of her cranium flooded onto the ground.

Takumi fired at it again but it was too fast, bounding from side to side as it bore down on the two of them. It crossed the street in the space of a few heartbeats and hammered its head into Takumi's chestplate with such an explosive force that it threw him into the wall of the building at his back.

All the air in his lungs exploded out as he slumped to the ground, he was done for, at least he would've been if his brother wasn't there.

Gunfire erupted from Wang's rifle as he riddled the creature with rounds until it was already melting into the ground.

Takumi gasped and coughed as he fought to get his lungs back into some form of respiratory rhythm, but already he could feel his brother's massive hands on him.

"Get the fuck up Tao! They need us!" Wang snarled, his usually stoic face was contorted into a visage of stress and violence.

In a single almost effortless movement he had hauled Takumi up onto his boots and pulled him along another few feet behind him. Almost in an effort to make sure he knew to follow.

They stood just outside the entrance, only a few feet from the woman's body, which still twitched occasionally.

"Can you keep up?" Wang said as he rammed a fresh magazine into his rifle.

Takumi nodded as he did the same preparations, albeit slightly more lethargically. He was still recovering from that thing crashing into him like a speeding car but there was no time to stop and lick his wounds and salve his pain in self pity.

"Stay on my six." Wang brought up his rifle and the duo infiltrated into this multi storey house of horrors.

Takumi checked their rear upon entering the foyer and heard a man's terrified scream accelerate hastily towards them from outside. It abruptly ended as he saw the man's body impact the street with a sound like a wet sack of jelly and sticks breaking off a rock.

The power to the building was fluctuating intermittently as the lights all around them flickered on and off, but it was enough to illuminate the bloodbath inside. Puddles of blood were spread around the floor of the foyer, creating an archipelago of slaughter amongst a sea of white tiles.

Littered amongst it all were shell casings ejected from what must have been small calibre pistols, the ones most commonly carried by law enforcement. Wang and Takumi both knew that more than a few police officers lived in this block.

They clearly had the same thing in mind as the two soldiers and had come back to rescue their families, there were no bodies but there was evidence enough that they had failed and paid the worst of prices. Takumi wondered briefly if they would share the same fate on the way back down.

They moved over to the two elevators, one of which had its doors ripped open. Wang tried to activate the other one but the system was clearly not responding. It was probably better that way, with how the power was behaving; taking the elevator was a surefire way of getting stuck.

Takumi briefly inspected the doors to the other lift, they had been wrenched open like the metal doors were nothing more than cardboard, speckles of chemical burns lined the crinkled steel as Takumi peered inside. Both the floor of the elevator and the roof had been torn open in a similar fashion and he could hear the horrible sounds of those things further up the shaft, resonating from many floors above.

He heard Wang behind him, inspecting the damaged device. "They came in through the maintenance sublevel."

As he said that the lights flickered off again, only this time they didn't come back on. "Stairs. C'mon." Wang whispered and they moved on. They reached the stair access and ascended as swiftly but as discreetly as they could.

As they climbed the pitch black spiral they imagined that with each flight ascended their lights would reflect off the hungry jaws of one of the monsters but no such sight greeted them. That didn't mean they weren't close however.

They could hear the harvest through the access doorways of each floor they climbed as families were pulled apart and dragged away from their homes by these foul invaders.

It was a long, nerve racking climb to their apartments on the twentieth floor and their legs and lungs begged them to stop but the fear of what they would find on their doorsteps pushed them on.

Neither of them even dared to think what they would do if they arrived and found the worst had happened. It was an incomprehensible thought, despite all the death and suffering they had seen on their journey here.

Fifteen floors up and both of them failed to hear the same horrifying macabre sounds as their ears had been subjected to a few floors down. Perhaps the creatures hadn't reached this high yet, perhaps their method was a systemic harvest of each floor on their way to the top. If it was, it was genius, trapping their future prey higher up, with their only escape being suicide.

Two floors to go and still there wasn't a single decibel of sound from the apartments outside the stairwell. They both inwardly theorised that the residents were hiding in silence although neither could deny that it was somewhat unnerving.

They reached their floor and Wang quietly swung open the door, aiming his rifle down the hallway. Their apartments resided at the very end of the hall and that's where the silence that haunted them was finally broken by the sound of breaking glass, and a child's screams.

"Oh god." Wang's breath shuddered and he broke into a desperate sprint down the hall. His boots thundering a heavy bass drum beat along the carpeted flooring as Takumi tried desperately to keep up.

Wang threw all of his weight into his good shoulder and thundered through the door into his apartment. A bang that unleashed the desperate, wailing cries of both their families and one of those things.

The screams were coming from his son's room and he exploded around the corner to see his wife; Fen and Takumi's wife in a tug of war with one of those creatures reaching in through the window like a monster from a child's nightmare, they were competing to win his son who was being pulled in half from both sides, screaming for his very life.

It had its long slender finger gripped around his calf, which was bleeding profusely as it snarled in conquest, it was pulling him closer and closer towards the window as Wang burst onto the scene.

It saw him enter and a bladed tail came thrusting towards him, instinctively he yanked his rifle up which caught the massive barb but the force of the impact pushed him onto his backside as the sounds of his young son's screams became impossibly louder.

Takumi entered behind him a heartbeat later and fired without hesitation at the beast's torso. The rounds snapped over Wang's son and hit the thing in its groin, shredding its hips and forcing it back through the window in agony before it could be heard screaming to strike the streets below.

There was no time to celebrate or rest as Wang's son lay on the bloodstained floor of his bedroom, crying in pain as he clutched the tattered remains of his little leg.

Takumi rested his rifle on the floor as he slid onto his knees next to the boy. "Wang hold him!" He ordered his brother, who with tears streaming down his anguished face knelt down and cradled his son's upper body with a tight embrace.

His leg was in a bad way. When the beast died it took a good portion of the child's calf with it. Most of what remained of the soft tissue was visible as the shredded remnants clung to the structure of his tibia and fibula, with the foot hanging limp and all but destroyed.

He needed in depth treatment from a fully trained trauma technician, neither of which was available to him at the moment and so Takumi had to do what he could in the next few moments.

He had only basic medical provisions in his kit but with luck it should be enough until they could escape from this urban hellscape. He ripped a tourniquet from his rig and hoisted the boy's light leg up just enough to slip the tourniquet around.

This small act summoned another wail from the boy as Wang smothered his cry with his hand. He was in hell at that moment, watching what his son was



going through but if he didn't remain strong they would all be somewhere far worse soon enough.

"I'm sorry my boy." Takumi said before he fastened the strap tightly and set it, all the while the child howled into his father's hand. The pain was so great that the child grew limp as shock set in and mercifully he passed out.

A brief moment of silence gratefully greeted the inside of the apartment as Fen quietly wept beside her husband while Li Jing manoeuvred around the wounded family to embrace Takumi while his boys slipped into the room to join them, their two young faces grew pale as they saw the blood all over the carpet, their little bodies quivering with fear.

"We tried to leave." Li Jing whispered with a sob. "But they were already in the lower floors of the building.

"I know my love, I know." He said, holding her close to him as he looked into the eyes of his two boys who stared in horror at their friend's leg.

"We're getting you all out of here but we need to do it now and quietly." Takumi then noticed the state of Wang's rifle which was clearly damaged from the tail strike it took to save him.

"You'll have to carry him brother. I'll take point." Takumi said, to which Wang replied with a defeated nod.

"Boys. Stay by your mother's side at all times, no matter what. Understood?" Takumi stared at his sons as he collected his rifle and climbed to his feet. At which point he saw the packed rucksacks in the room outside. "Leave everything, we take only ourselves."

Wang slowly rose up, clutching his son close to his chest, the pain in his heart was evident on his face. To which Takumi grasped his unwounded, cannonball sized shoulder.

"We're gonna get out of here." He stared into the bigger man's eyes before tenderly rubbing the cropped hair of the boy in his arms. "All of us." To which Wang nodded meekly.

The group moved through the apartment to the shattered door with Takumi at the front, his rifle at the ready. They could hear the sounds of chaos in the floors below, the demons were getting closer.

“Keep close to me. No sound.” Takumi whispered before they moved on towards the building’s stairwell and the path downward to salvation.

Takumi’s assumption was right, as they descended the stairwell downward to the next floor they could hear a group of the creatures ransacking the apartments outside. He wondered if any of their group uttered a single breath as they passed by.

All they had to do was covertly navigate the remainder of the stairwell to get to the ground floor. It seemed so simple hypothetically and as Takumi saw the sign for the tenth floor he allowed a portion of hope to flicker in his heart.

But as a military man he should’ve known better, no plan ever unfolds unhindered on the battlefield and his home had certainly become a battlefield.

On the way down to the eighth floor the group's hushed silence was disturbed by Wang’s son as he let out a monotone moan. It wasn’t loud but under the current circumstances the sound travelled further than anyone was comfortable with.

The group halted for a moment, their ears attuned for the sound of those things pursuing them as Wang and Fen hushed their child. Nothing came after them and they continued down.

But another few steps later the boy let out a painfully loud cry as he awoke to a pain most would never dare to experience.

Takumi’s heart sunk to the pit of his stomach, he wished he had a syrette of morphine to jag the kid with back in the apartment.

“Hush sweetheart, please.” Fen said, her voice filled with panic and fear as Takumi and Wang’s eyes met in horror.

A set of heavy footsteps could be heard pounding through the hall in the floor below them as a door crashed open and the entity thundered up the stairs out

of sight towards them. It didn't utter a single growl or hiss, its swift approach was threatening enough.

Takumi was ready with his rifle aimed at the bottom of the stairs, its light breaching the darkness. But still his heart froze as it rounded the corner, it was so ruthlessly fast; in the blink of an eye the stairs disappeared behind a blur of glistening malevolence and hungering, slavering teeth eager to sink into his family huddled behind the blanket of his protection.

There was no time for accuracy as he unloaded down the dark narrow passageway at the demon. By the time his brain signalled to his trigger finger to squeeze the thing was already mere feet from him. Deafening noise and flashes of smoky light obscured the horrifying form as he fired in absolute terror.

Its screams echoed through the entire building as its body tumbled down to sink into the corner of the stairwell. Already its acidic blood was melting through the floor, the vapours and smoke wafting upwards to fill the entire space.

"Follow my steps exactly!" Takumi snarled through the burning vapours to everyone above their screams of panic as all visibility was lost to the smoke. He descended the steps quickly but carefully, lighting the way as he checked that they wouldn't step directly onto the caustic blood.

Once they were past it, Takumi made them throw caution to the wind and break into a full run down the next flight. He could already see the blood slowly making its way through the roof once they reached the next floor; they had to stay ahead of it if they wanted to make it out of the building.

And that wasn't the only thing they were racing against, they had company, following them from higher up in the block and they didn't have the hindrance of discretion as they could be heard leaping down each flight, roaring in anger.

As they hit the fourth floor both Takumi and Wang knew full well that they wouldn't make it out before the creatures behind them caught up to them. They could hear them getting closer and closer as they descended.

"Tao wait! Fen take him." Wang said as the group stopped as he handed the still wailing boy to his wife. "Frag." The bigger man said.

Takumi didn't hesitate, he ripped the device from his chest rig and tossed it to Wang.

"I'll be right behind you. Go!" He shouted at the group who then continued their desperate escape.

Wang would have to time it perfectly, if he didn't he was dead, Takumi thought as he continued running, expecting every corner they turned to be their last.

"Fire in the hole!" He heard his brother shout from two floors above, the grenade had a five second fuse, which was just enough time for him to get down the next flight.

Takumi timed it mentally and a few seconds later a booming thud shook the floor beneath them as the concussive force raced down the passageway to rage into their backs.

As they reached the second floor he could hear footsteps coming from their rear and he motioned the women and children past him as he sighted his weapon at where they just came from. Fully prepared to engage another one of those creatures.

He exhaled a sigh of relief as he saw a dust covered Wang come sprinting around the corner. "You get them all?" Takumi asked with a shaky voice.

"I think so." Wang came to a stop next to Fen and took their boy, she was struggling with him as he was understandably struggling against her embrace in pain. "Hush my boy." The group began to move down the last two flights to escape this house of wolves.

They made it outside of the building only to be greeted by a deserted street haunted by a living wave of silence. The beasts had clearly had their way with this area for now, with the majority of them ferrying their bounty underground to whatever hell they had emerged from.

"We need to head to the air base, that's our best shot." Takumi suggested, it wasn't a guarantee but if there was any form of garrison or even just a field hospital it was surely better than here.

“Agreed, it’s a good couple miles but it's defendable.” Wang said with a hint of exhaustion.

The group ran down the street eager to get away from their home, a place that was once a sanctuary, now a honeycombed charnel house.

For half a mile they didn’t see a single soul, the only movement that their eyes registered was the flickering of dying flames and the tendrils of smoke as they rose up to the sky above.

The adrenaline kept them going but understandably one of Takumi’s sons was beginning to falter in his pace.

“Dad.” He puffed out. “I can’t... I can’t keep going.” He said as he slowed down to walking pace, clutching his stomach as his chest heaved in an effort to intake oxygen.

Takumi and Li Jing slowed down to match his pace while their other son ran on with the others.

“C’mon.” Takumi grunted as he lifted his son over his left shoulder, still holding his rifle in the other hand by the carry handle. “We can’t stop, son. We have to keep going.”

They regained their pace to catch up to the others who were twenty paces ahead and looked on in absolute horror as a glistening shadow threw itself from the shadows to smack into the large form of Wang, flooring him and his injured son.

“No!” Takumi instantly dropped his son and ran forward, levelling his rifle as the women and children screamed but he couldn’t fire, not without killing Wang or his son.

His heart lurched as he could hear Wang roar as he tumbled into a melee on the ground with the beast, its inhuman silhouette covering both their bodies.

It was all over within a matter of heartbeats, the demon lunged upward, ripping Wang’s screaming son out of his helpless arms before it dashed off like a dark blur into the alleyway next to them. With the boy’s terrified, pain filled cries carrying off deep into the darkness until they withered into distant silence.

Fen shrieked like a banshee, it was the most awful of sounds as a mother's heart audibly tore in two at the loss of her child. But such a bond was so strong that it vanquished all thoughts of fear and self preservation and without hesitation, she ran into that foreboding abyss.

"No Fen! Don't go in there!" Takumi called to her but he knew it was pointless, then he turned to Wang fully expecting to see him lying there dead.

But the giant of a man wasn't dead, his body was criss-crossed with cuts and slashes but he rose up, his eyes watering with despair and rage, clearly ready to follow his wife into that darkness.

"My Boy!" He roared despairingly. "We need to catch up to her, we can get him back." Wang said desperately as he moved to follow his wife.

An achingly long second of silence passed, followed by a word that shattered two worlds.

"No." Takumi said as he stared at his brother with a gaze laden in agony. Damning himself for the choice he had to make as he felt his boys clutch at his legs in fear. "To go in there is death and I'm not taking them in there."

"What?" Amongst everything Wang was clearly confused, in any other circumstance both of them would follow the other into the darkest, deepest recesses of hell. They would die for each other gladly but this was the hidden monster of situations that broke that most unbreakable of bonds.

In that awful silence they could hear Fen in the alleyway screaming out for a son that was most undoubtedly already dead.

"We can't leave him." Wang was clearly on the edge of hysteria as he walked back over and gripped Takumi on both shoulders with a crushing grip strengthened by despair. "We're not leaving without him."

"I won't make my family follow you down that path brother. He's gone and you know it."

Tears washed down Wang's dust-smeared face as his eyes pleaded to Takumi. "We can save him."

Takumi shook his head. "I'm sorry brother but he's dead and I won't let my family die for a ghost."

"Then we'll go after him without you." The deep sorrow that lined Wang's face flashed into a bitter snarl as he reached for Takumi's rifle to pull it away but he held onto it tightly.

Wang's eyes signified that he clearly didn't expect Takumi to resist him and he pulled on the rifle again, only this time with much more force but still Takumi held fast despite being the smaller man.

They continued to struggle for another few seconds and Takumi knew he'd lose and if he lost the rifle his chances of getting his family out of here were slim. So he cheated.

He punched Wang directly in the shoulder that got impaled with the piece of metal in the flight down. Causing the bigger man to growl in pain and loosen his grip on the weapon.

Takumi took a step back and pointed the barrel towards his brother's wide chest. "I can't imagine what you're feeling brother and I don't want to. Don't leave us to go and die a wasted death, get Fen back here and come with us. Please." He begged as he held the rifle at Wang's chest with a shaking grip.

In one swift and furious motion Wang smacked the rifle aside with his left hand and delivered a single hook to the side of Takumi's face, landing directly on his cheekbone.

Li Jing screamed as her husband fell to the ground but his brother was instantly over him, yanking the rifle from his weakened grasp before standing over the duo, their two sons hiding behind them both as they all stared up at the threatening giant.

"Please! Don't!" Li Jing pleaded as she held her husband's head in her hands who was just regaining his composure from the power of the strike.

"I'm sorry Tao. I can't leave him, I have to find him. You would be no different."

“I know.” Takumi said grimly as he looked up to his best friend for the last time, damning the fates as he saw him turn and run head on into that darkness. Into death’s jaws.

After a few moments Takumi shoved all of that pain into a well locked box and got himself and his family back onto their feet. This was no place to mourn or drink in the sea of sadness they were drowning in.

“We need to go. Now.” Takumi urged as he cupped Li Jing’s face in his dirtied, bloodied hands. He took her hand to lead them away but she remained in place, still staring into that black maw that ate their second family.

“They might come back.” She sobbed, the desperation was rich in her voice.

“No. They won’t.” He said and he pulled her and his boys into another slow jog out of the street and towards the outskirts of the city. There were some close calls on the way but eventually they regrouped with some survivors and with ever increasing numbers they reached the military checkpoint just past the botanical food production fields on the outskirts of the city.

One of the soldiers on duty recognised Takumi’s uniform and alerted his superior to his arrival. Takumi sent Li Jing and his boys further on to the aid stations. They were exhausted beyond measure and needed rest and aid.

Takumi knew the commanding officer, it was his company Captain and he had seen and knew combat all too well. But judging from the look of concern on his face, what he saw in Takumi unnerved him.

“What the hell happened back there Sergeant? The things these people are saying don’t make any sense, gimme some goddamn answers so I know what my men are walking into.”

Takumi just shook his head defeatedly, he turned back to face the smoking ruins. “What they’re saying is all true sir, we were attacked by something, something we’re not ready for.”

“For god’s sake I need a tactical assessment son, not folklore.”



“My assessment is get as many people as you can out of there and nuke the area. There’s no winning here.” Takumi said before moving to walk past the Captain but he stopped him with a hand to the shoulder.

Takumi looked at the officer directly in the eyes with something fierce and defiant.

“You are not relieved of duty Sergeant.” The Captain’s voice was stern and confident.

“My duty to my family is all that concerns me now sir and I need to ensure they get as far away from here as they can.”

The shift in the Captain’s eyes indicated that he recognised the strength of that conviction and his features softened with respect, but there was still a grit there.

“Stay and help me here and I’ll have them on the first ship out of here once they pass the quarantine window.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I’m sorry to say that I can’t guarantee when a transport will become available for you all or where you’ll go.”

Takumi’s shoulders sagged with exhaustion as he stared at the ground beneath him. Then the memory of Wang running after his family flashed into his mind, what would he be if he didn’t do the same? What would that sacrifice mean if he didn’t do everything in his power to ensure his own family’s safety.

“Very well sir. I need a weapon.” Takumi said and he vanquished all thoughts of rest.

A few hours later, after a long tearful goodbye to his family Takumi was posted on the makeshift barricade, rearmed and watchful over the city beyond.

As more and more survivors poured into the checkpoint his eyes constantly scanned for the towering figure of the brother he left behind but he never appeared.

And after a short and disturbed sleep he awoke to the arising sun burning over the flames still raging deep inside the city. It was eerily quiet in that place he used to call home.

But hope flickered in his heart as what sounded like a single shooter could be heard in the silence. Echoes of furious fighting travelled all the way from downtown to the outer perimeter and with every gunshot that sounded, Takumi imagined it was Wang, still in the fight.

But he knew he couldn't entertain that thought, it caused the remaining fragmented piece of his honour to compel him to march back in there alone. And that thought tormented him in every waking moment of silence from each day onward.

Until two weeks later, when Takumi stood on that towering wall on the last night, fighting back an endless sea of death amongst the mightiest of storms. The night he died and he was finally free of the ghosts that haunted him, of those he had loved and yet left behind.