

Littleblossom Makes a Deal with the Devil

By

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Snow was knee-deep outside the bleached skeleton of Harbin, making Xiaoying work to get across the valley floor. Her ears burned with the cold, even under the felt flaps of her hat. Every day, she thought about the orders Comrade Lieutenant Liu had given her. "You will be unsupported in Heilongjiang Province. No one will come until the spring. Live until our troops can cross the rivers again."

From beneath the camouflage of kindling on her back came Grandma Thinkbox's quiet voice. "You should have something hot to drink, child. Do not make yourself sick."

"Yes, nainai. As soon as I check on Pig."

After Comrade Liu had been evacuated with the last of the support troops, Xiaoying had rearranged the personality of her assistant battlefield AI into something that suited her better. If she were going to spend months carrying it around, she wasn't going to listen to it drone on like a party chief. The way it talked now reminded her of her grandmother. The missiles had overlays for their small brains, too, and she'd decorated them with personalities as well. Boredom was a more immediate enemy than Japan.

Pig was still in its burrow, protected by a sheath of snow. It responded to the presence of Grandma Thinkbox and the prod of a narrow twig.

"I'm fine!" Pig's voice sounded just as she'd told it to sound, nasal and snarly. "Have you found that locust yet? No? Then don't trouble me!"

"I'll find it for you, Pig." Xiaoying pulled the tab on a ration pack and squatted in the snow while it heated.

She was the entire army of China left in this part of Dongbei. A few people still scraped out an existence in the valley, but not enough to support a village, much less the modern city Harbin had once been. Xiaoying neither pitied nor admired these diehards. She was simply glad to have them around for camouflage.

An enemy cybertank had taken up permanent residence in the area north of the city, and Xiaoying walked in its tracks. The hundred-ton weight of the mazha had compacted a hard snow road for her. Grandma Thinkbox had taught her to use the force of the enemy against it.

The cybertank was covered with graffiti from times it had parked in the city. **We are determined to liberate Dongbei**, it said in dripping characters across its tread skirts. **Imperialism is doomed to failure. The Revolutionary struggle throughout the world is bound to triumph.** Cartoons and splashes of

dried blood also decorated the mazha, but none of it obscured the original meter-high pennant marking: 031. You could say whatever you wanted to the invaders, or display whatever slogans expressed your feelings, and they didn't mind. If you *acted*, however . . .

The improvised road passed near the grove where Dog slept, buried near the wrecked remains of a tank. Dog was glad to see her.

"There was a great noise, lady!" the missile said when she woke it. "I wanted to chase it, but I remembered that you told me not to, so I slept again."

"You are a good Dog," she told it.

Her hut was cold when she returned. It wasn't much of a base: her sleeping nest of old blankets and straw, a fuel cell for collecting power from the small turbine in the stream, a few bottles for collecting water, and a salvaged plastic feed tub she used as a chamber pot. Moisture wept in from the crown of the roof, but the straw soaked it up. Xiaoying didn't notice any moldy smell yet.

She had stacked the rest of the hut with little things: Comrade Captain Peng's uniform jacket, Corporal Ma's machine pistol (Xiaoying had saved forty-seven cartridges for it, but had never found anything to shoot at), a small handheld vid terminal, and pictures cut out of old magazines or printed from images taken by Grandma Thinkbox. They were all here, the last signs of the commando cell. Except for Comrade Liu, who hadn't left her anything but orders.

The fuel cell looked nearly full, and Grandma Thinkbox sighed as it was connected to the charger. Xiaoying found the other wires leading into the hut, and plugged them in, too. The other missiles were close enough to run direct leads; Chicken, Snake, and Ox all reported in. Tiger made her wait a few extra seconds, as usual.

"Maps," she said.

Strings of green light wavered in the air above the AI's housing, forming contour lines shaping the land from Harbin to Wuzhan. Symbols lit the positions of her missiles and the last reported detections of the enemy. Xiaoying swam motionless in the glow.

"Track plot for 031."

Obediently, a trace of white looped among the miniature hills and valleys. It intensified and faded, marking in rapid time the order of several months' sightings. She could never have worked out the complex pattern for herself. Grandma Thinkbox had taken a long time to be certain that it wasn't random.

Unit 031 had been their cell's sole target. They'd expended half their missiles, all their demolitions, and almost their entire strength against it. Comrade Liu had been the last, almost flayed by the cybertank's smart-flechette guns from over the horizon.

The white line pulsed within 300 meters of Dog's buried canister. Xiaoying kept the map centered on this point for a long time.

"A guerilla fighter is patient," Grandmother Thinkbox said. "Ineffective demonstrations against a superior enemy waste materiel. Do you remember what happened to Dragon and Rat?"

Xiaoying remembered. She'd left them autonomous too long, and they'd attacked 031 simultaneously as it passed between their camouflaged canisters.

In an instant, Dragon and Rat flashed into nothing, neither of them closer than a kilometer to their target. And then she had six.

"Simulation palette," Xiaoying said. "Northeast Harbin. Run Plan Six, repeating."

The air over the AI wavered again, replaced with a much larger-scale map focused on the bombed-out industrial sectors of the city. Individual buildings were modeled, updated to show which were intact, which were usable as vehicular hides, and which were rubble. Six points of red light marked planned positions for missile launch points. Large splotches of white marked the defenses of the Japanese base and the beaten zones of their fortifications. A white line snaked out of the city, patrolling as 031 did. When it came through the area marked for her missiles, they sprouted red lines of calculated intercepts.

They didn't reach their targets, even with all six of them at point-blank range.

The simulation restarted, adding different random variables: weather, the hypothetical path of their quarry, possible movements of civilians and wildlife. Failure. The simulations kept starting over, faster and faster, showing all possible ways in which Xiaoying would not destroy 031. She watched the colored lights flicker, die, and be reborn. Failure.

"We will not have to wait much longer, Xiaoying."

The cold was forgotten. Xiaoying looked at the box wide-eyed, almost in tears. "You've heard something? Is the army returning early?" She'd lived! She'd done it! Surely, Comrade Liu would be giving her the orders to act in concert with the new offensive! And, one way or another, she would finally be out of the cold.

"No, child," said the AI. "Peacekeepers from the Pacific Alliance have landed, and Dongbei will be administered by them until Beijing is ready to do it again."

After her brief spring, Xiaoying felt the winter again. More foreigners were coming to China.

"We must dig up your friends, child. The peacekeepers will want them."

"And the mazha?" Xiaoying's teeth chattered.

"They will be disarmed. All will be well. The war will be over."

"Order of battle, Pacific Alliance." Xiaoying geared back up for the cold. Her guts clenched.

"We haven't received any details yet. The first of them will reach Harbin by morning."

"Nainai, do you remember Comrade Liu's stories about the time before the Revolution?" Xiaoying retied her boots with more force than she needed to.

Calling the AI "nainai" had been a little girl's game; the nickname stung her now, though she made herself say it just as before.

"He told you those stories, child, not me."

"Before the Revolution, China was laid low. Foreigners came from all over the world to take land because no one could stop them."

Grandmother Thinkbox said nothing, of course. It was so easy to forget that the grandmotherly speech was something that Xiaoying had crafted onto the machine. She'd done a good enough job that she'd thought of the AI as kind,

wise and old, even when she knew better.

"The Japanese might have swallowed up China entirely." Xiaoying refastened her parka. "But the People found the will to throw them out, and later, to throw out the corrupt forces that had allowed China to rot in the first place."

Xiaoying had more to say, but no time to say it. She'd pushed her luck already, giving free reign to her feelings during the outburst. No telling what the AI's stress and context analysis might have picked up.

"Where are you going, child?"

"I am going to retrieve the maintenance key." Xiaoying was relieved. It seemed the AI hadn't caught on.

Xiaoying left the AI to its deceit and collaboration with the fools in the chain of command. She trudged off to save China. It felt safer to think without the computer on her back. Grandmother Thinkbox wanted to shut the missiles down, and to do that she'd need human hands to insert a security override key. Xiaoying would get the key, all right. Maintenance mode would also let her fire the missiles manually.

At the drainpipe that had been her base before she'd discovered the abandoned hut, she kept a cache of packaged food here and an extra parka. And the maintenance key, which she fished out of the filthy, icy creek. Its waterproof case was still intact. One obstacle cleared.

She felt a rumble through the ground. As it grew audible, she knew she had to leave.

What had been a roadway was now merely a long clearing. What the war hadn't destroyed with artillery impacts and heavy vehicle traffic, the winter had completed. The concrete was churned and cratered into a surface worse than the terrain off the road. But that didn't bother the mazha.

It swept into view around a copse of willows, which shivered away their blankets of snow as the ground trembled. The cybertank was low, slab-sided and angular, a dark alloy wedge showing no visible weapons or sensors. It moved furtively, more like an animal than a machine. Though it was bigger than a house and heavy enough to shake the earth, it flitted about on its treads as if it weighed nothing.

Xiaoying remembered to walk, to seem like a peasant on her way to scrounge something to eat.

031 stopped again, facing her, a few hundred meters away. If it decided she was responsible for the attacks on itself or its base, she wouldn't have time to register anything before it killed her. She would very much like it to recognize her, she realized. She wanted it to know it had enemies. The drunkards who'd painted on it might have felt the same way. Instead, she kept walking, observing as much as she could out of the corner of her eye. She knew the bottled hell it could release; at least she'd seen its effects afterward. Long range hypersonic missiles, swarmbots, the horrible smart-flechette guns, and the interceptor missiles and lasers it had used to kill Rat and Dragon. It was difficult to reconcile that with the featureless lump humming to itself in the snow. More terrifying than any weapon was the implacable intelligence beneath.

Xiaoying knew it wasn't really sentient. She knew that it was an AI just like

Grandmother Thinkbox. What she knew didn't change the dread she felt. *Gwailo* wasn't just a superstitious cliché here; 031 was really a foreign devil. Worse, it was a devil she lacked the strength to banish. The only things in Dongbei strong enough to make it leave were the other *gwailo* streaming in from the coast. They were, regrettably, her only option.

Her task would be much easier if the machine could understand Mandarin. She knew it could *read* well enough, as the *mazha* would occasionally examine road signs and such. Occupation directives had been broadcast in accentless synthetic speech, in both Japanese and Mandarin, but they were simply recordings.

She forced herself to raise her hand and wave.

"I have the key." Xiaoying burst into the hut accompanied by a flurry of snow.

"I am ready to proceed," said Grandmother Thinkbox. "Insert the maintenance key."

The key, an irregular block of translucent plastic with a tiny transceiver embedded inside, remained in Xiaoying's pocket as she bundled up the AI in her pack once again. She did not bother with much in the way of camouflage.

"Stand by." Xiaoying lifted the machine onto her back. *Say hello to all the traitors in hell*, she didn't add. Instead, she said, "We're going to contact each missile by direct link. Less risk of detection that way."

She had to tell the device to stand by four more times during the hike. The AI had its own positioning device, and knew it wasn't being taken around to the missiles.

031 had returned to the clearing where'd she'd seen it before. It waited silently.

Xiaoying set her pack down just out of line of sight of the massive cybertank. She loosened enough straps to allow access to Grandmother Thinkbox's security port and inserted the maintenance key. It whirred into place.

"Place search, acquisition, and fire-control systems in maintenance mode," Xiaoying said. "Execute."

"Completed," the machine responded, its mechanical voice muted to tactical levels. "Child, there are several enemy traces close by. This is not a safe place to do this." It had lapsed away from the terse language of orders; it was using every folksy bit of grandmotherliness Xiaoying had crafted into it.

"No," she said. "It's not safe. No more talking. Stand by."

Xiaoying thought it might know what was coming. Its electronic suffering was gratifying, but she had to act quickly.

She carried the pack before her as she walked into the clearing. The tank seemed oblivious to her presence, but Xiaoying knew better than to believe that. 031 could have detected and killed her kilometers ago; it waited instead.

"Stop," said the *mazha*'s amplified synthetic voice as she reached the middle of the clearing. Xiaoying stopped. A small motion from beneath the machine's treads caught her attention. A small machine, smaller than a cat, flailed through the packed snow with devices that were not quite wheels or legs.

The swarmbot had to work hard to cover the difficult meters between them. Xiaoying placed her pack on the snow and waited. At length, the 'bot stopped an arm's length from her.

"Identify yourself," it said in a tiny version of its master's voice. Xiaoying couldn't say if it was exactly a male or female voice they'd sampled to create it. Maybe it had no natural source at all. It had been both a relief and an affront to hear the tank's Mandarin.

"I am Long Laoshu," she said. "I've brought the insurgent device."

There was a pause. "Thank you, Miss Rat Dragon. Your cooperation with the New Enterprise Zone Security Forces will be recorded and rewarded." The swarmbot looked at her with eyes she couldn't see, photocascade nets built indistinguishably into its tough plastic case.

"I'll take my reward now." Her speech slurred more than she meant it to. She needed to get warm. "Where are the peacekeepers?"

The 'bot sat unmoving for a few more seconds, a lot longer than Xiaoying figured that 031 would need to think about things. "Vanguard elements of the Pacific Eight-Power Alliance peacekeeping forces have reached the crossroads of State Highway Five and the Taixu Ring Road. Is this information truly the only reward you desire, Miss Rat Dragon? I can authorize extra disbursement of ration relief packages, or an amount of—"

"No, that's fine," she said.

"Please leave the area while the insurgent device is neutralized."

Xiaoying didn't waste any time getting out of the way.

The satchel with Grandma Thinkbox in it sat alone on the snowy field as she withdrew; the swarmbot was leaving as fast as it could thrash along the other way. Though it might have looked suspicious, Xiaoying kept looking over her shoulder at the fate of her former AI comrade. She started a little when she heard the cybertank begin to move. It looked like 031 wasn't willing to use up any munitions on Grandmother Thinkbox. The machine glided forward, packing snow under its treads with a soft crunch that belied the threat of its hundred-ton mass. Xiaoying gave up any pretense of not watching. She figured anyone would do the same.

Just before the oncoming graffiti-covered bulk of the tank swept over the pack, flattening the tough bulletproof plastic of Grandmother Thinkbox's case as if it were paper, a small object popped out of the pack. She was too far away to see details, but with a sick pit of certainty in her gut, Xiaoying knew what it was. Grandmother Thinkbox had ejected the maintenance key before being crushed.

031 pivoted on one tread and withdrew toward the ruins of Harbin with a receding tremble of the earth. It left behind a smear of plastic debris—the wreckage of both the AI, and of her plan. Since Grandma Thinkbox had closed out the missile maintenance cycle, she no longer held a trigger to fire the missiles. They'd reject her commands until provided with the proper codes. Beijing wouldn't send her any more. Beijing was too busy selling her home to foreigners.

Xiaoying realized she had fallen to her knees when the damp chill finally ate through her trousers. Forcing herself to rise, she set out at a determined pace

for the hut. She hadn't time to feel sorry for herself! She had to save China!

Inside, the hut seemed strangely larger without Grandma Thinkbox. Xiaoying waved away the distracting thought. The machine had gotten what it deserved. She forced her numb fingers to fish out the wires hidden under the layers of plastic tarpaulin and straw on the floor. Her hands didn't want to cooperate. She'd been outside too long; Grandma Thinkbox would have scolded her.

The little vid terminal was a civilian model with only a single port, so she could only plug in one missile at a time.

"Snake?" she said into the little terminal. "Snake, do you hear me?"

"I hear many things, Mistress. Unsettling things."

"Snake, I need you to help me. I need you to enter maintenance mode."

"I await the proper offering." Its tinny voice carried the dry sibilance she'd made for Snake so long ago.

"There won't be any interlock codes," Xiaoying said. "There won't be any ever again. Grandmother Thinkbox has . . . has been lost to the enemy."

"Even the Mistress must make the proper offering."

Xiaoying wanted to curse her own handiwork, but now her only hope was that the many extra layers she'd crafted into the missiles' brains would give her the opening she needed.

"The codes are to prevent you from being used by the enemy, Snake. I am not the enemy. The enemy profits by our inaction. I need your help," she added with more emotion than she'd meant to.

"I require an offering."

But not "the proper offering," though, Xiaoying noticed. She was afraid to say the wrong thing. She was afraid to wait too long. She was afraid.

"Challenge my identity," Xiaoying said.

"What place did I finish in the race?"

Xiaoying smiled until she felt her windburned skin crack. "Sixth. Just ahead of Horse."

"You are my Mistress," it said.

Xiaoying tapped in instructions as fast as she could with the terminal's little keypad.

"Mistress is planning a surprise," said Snake afterward. "I do so love surprises."

"I know, Snake. Now be ready. And thank you."

Xiaoying switched one wire for another, breathing on her hands to keep them working.

"Ox, do you hear me?"

It was getting dark. Xiaoying knew she shouldn't be out again with no food or rest, even without considering she was now in violation of the mazha's curfew. She hadn't convinced Pig. Pig wanted to throw itself at 031. In the end, he sulked and relocked himself in autonomous mode.

She found the wrecked tank where Dog and its wire lead were buried in

the snow.

"Dog, do you hear me?"

"Lady! All has been quiet here!"

"We are finally ready to move, but there is a problem. Grandma Thinkbox has been destroyed. I need you to fire on manual command, and to do that I need you to confirm my identity to enter maintenance mode." She had refined the spiel after five tries.

"You are the Lady! No one comes to see Dog but the Lady!"

Xiaoying blinked a few times, not expecting it to be that easy. She tapped in Dog's firing orders.

"We are not to attack the enemy, Lady?"

"No, Dog. You're going to get someone else to do that."

"I am glad to help! We can do it!"

Xiaoying really didn't want to cry. She didn't want ice on her face. "Yes, we will. You are a good Dog."

Snow began to shake from the barren trees.

A mazha was coming. By the tremor, she could tell it was 031 or one of its broodmates. She was still alive, so it hadn't detected her and decided she was a threat. It might change its mind in—she looked at her watch—ninety-three seconds, but Xiaoying had nowhere to run. She ripped the wire from her terminal and huddled in the carcass of the dead tank.

If the mazha came close enough, the cold metal of the wreck would not shield her body heat from its sensors. She waited and calculated and wished Grandma Thinkbox hadn't belonged to the traitors in Beijing who wanted to let foreigners partition her home. She lost track of the count, which made her jump when Dog obeyed its order.

Dog was about as long as Xiaoying was tall, a featureless thick-walled tube that blasted out of the ground in an eruption of snow and dirt. She had only a blurred glimpse of her friend before the metal-hydride ramjet lit, taking over from the launch booster and accelerating Dog out of sight to the southeast. She could see flashes over the hill her hut. That should be Ox, Snake, Tiger, and Chicken launching on schedule. If things were going as planned, they'd arc from their canisters to the line she'd programmed, a line that ran straight from the Japanese base to the reported position of the Pacific Alliance troops.

The missiles were too small, and their smokeless and nearly flameless engines didn't reveal them to her sight. The nearby cybertank saw them and popped out smaller, even faster missiles that shrieked after them. Xiaoying was pretty certain they wouldn't matter. The mazha would have aimed to make intercepts to protect itself, not to catch missiles that were even now turning for the coast and running away at Mach 6.

Ox would be the first to sacrifice itself, popping up into a ballistic arc and searching the ground ahead of his ground-hugging brothers. If (no, when) it was shot down, Tiger would pop up into the lead next. Xiaoying didn't expect any of them to actually reach a target, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that when the peacekeepers tracked them back, they'd appear to have been fired by the Japanese. By the time anyone would have leisure to examine the wreckage,

it wouldn't matter who'd fired first.

She heard another launch, down the valley from where she'd just hiked. Pig had changed its mind, after all. In another heartbeat, more missiles. Not interceptors this time. She peered upward. Faint licks of exhaust flitted by, chasing after her friends. The cybertank had launched a wave of long-range missiles at the Pacific Alliance forces, too. It knew there was going to be a counterstrike, and decided it was in the fight whether it planned to be or not. Xiaoying admired the enemy for its decisive and resolute nature. She hoped it would die in fire.

The icy metal of the wreck she leaned against had numbed her entire body. Xiaoying was too tired to get up. She didn't want to be asleep when the Alliance missiles arrived; she'd hoped to see it. There was a real danger that the Pacific Alliance would decide the hulk she hid beneath was a target worth expending a few submunitions on. Yet, sleep was sounding like a better option. She'd done everything she could to save China. The gwailo would at least be fighting amongst themselves now.

She didn't know if she'd see the sunrise again, but at least she no longer felt the cold.