



EXTINCTION AGENDA

When Mother Earth targets humanity for death, the heroes of *Spirit of the Tao* have just one problem: deciding which side to take

Earth's had enough. After creating holes in the ozone layer, devastating rain forests, and causing countless oil spills, humanity's messed with Mother Nature one too many times. And She's finally striking back.

In *Spirit of the Tao*, one of Top Cow's younger titles, Earth's ancient defensive system, the Tao (pronounced "Dow," rhymes with "cow"), has targeted humanity for extinction. Its survival depends on the Tao dragon, a fierce creature that destroys any species threatening the Earth. A natural, physical manifestation of the Tao, the Tao dragon's power currently resides in the hands of two inexperienced eighteen-year-olds, series stars Lance and Jasmine.

But humanity's not taking the possibility of its extinction lying down. Fortunately, its got defenders of its own: ancient clans, scheming aliens and an obsessive millionaire. But that's where the shared goal—wanting the Tao destroyed—ends. Earth's would-be saviors all have their own agenda, and the line between hero and villain is very thin. And that ambiguity is just how writer D-Tron likes it.

"Evil in this book is subjective, just as it is in life," says D-Tron. "I don't consider anyone evil. Some [of the characters] are overzealous, obsessive, maybe even crazy, but not evil. Many times we judge other people—whether they're right or wrong, moral or immoral—based on our own personal beliefs. But there's no absolute answer. Is killing humans evil? Yes, from [our] perspective. But from Mother Earth's perspective, it's only a matter of survival."

TOP TAO

As the series unfolds, everything revolves around Lance and Jasmine. Raised together from birth, the duo, as the incarnation of the Tao, share a strong psychic connection and possess violent powers (see "Character Profile" sidebar, page 76) that are emerging faster than they can learn to control them.

"They're just trying to cope with their new roles in life and stay together," says D-Tron. "Unfortunately, due to Lance and Jasmine's opposing views, their relationship won't last unless one breaks or they reach a compromise. Although she's half human, Jasmine will take on the role of the Tao as a killer of all creatures that threaten Mother Earth's existence. Lance also feels the influence of the Tao, but chooses to deliver mankind from destruction [instead]."

One relationship that seems to be working out just fine is the creative team behind *Spirit of the Tao*, which *Witchblade* inker D-Tron co-created with brother Hoai Trung and series penciler Billy Tan last year. Planned as a 22-issue mini-series, the trio based their story, and Lance and Jasmine's

developing opposition, on the classic Eastern philosophy of Taoism, which teaches that nature is a delicate, shifting balance.

A key image seen throughout the series is Taoism's circular symbol, the yin and yang. Its black and white halves embody the eternal struggle of opposites, such as good and evil, or in this case, the subdued, compassionate Lance and the sexy, hot-tempered Jasmine. The Tao in *Spirit of the Tao* is trying to return balance to an unbalanced world, but where does killing humans come into the equation?

"The Tao views humans as a virus that constantly brings harm to its body," says Tan. "The Tao is just protecting itself from the annoying pest living [off of] it that is disturbing the development of other species."

BALANCING THE SCALES

So, other than the conflicted Lance, who else is there to protect us "germs"? First, there're the Tao Hunters, a trio of immortal aliens whose name suggests they're here to defeat the Tao and save humanity, right? Yes...and no. While the Tao Hunters do want to destroy the Tao, their reasons are less than noble: They want to make the Earth vulnerable for other, more sinister plans.

"The Tao Hunters have existed since the beginning of time, but their purpose wasn't for the benefit of humanity," says D-Tron. "It runs deeper than that."

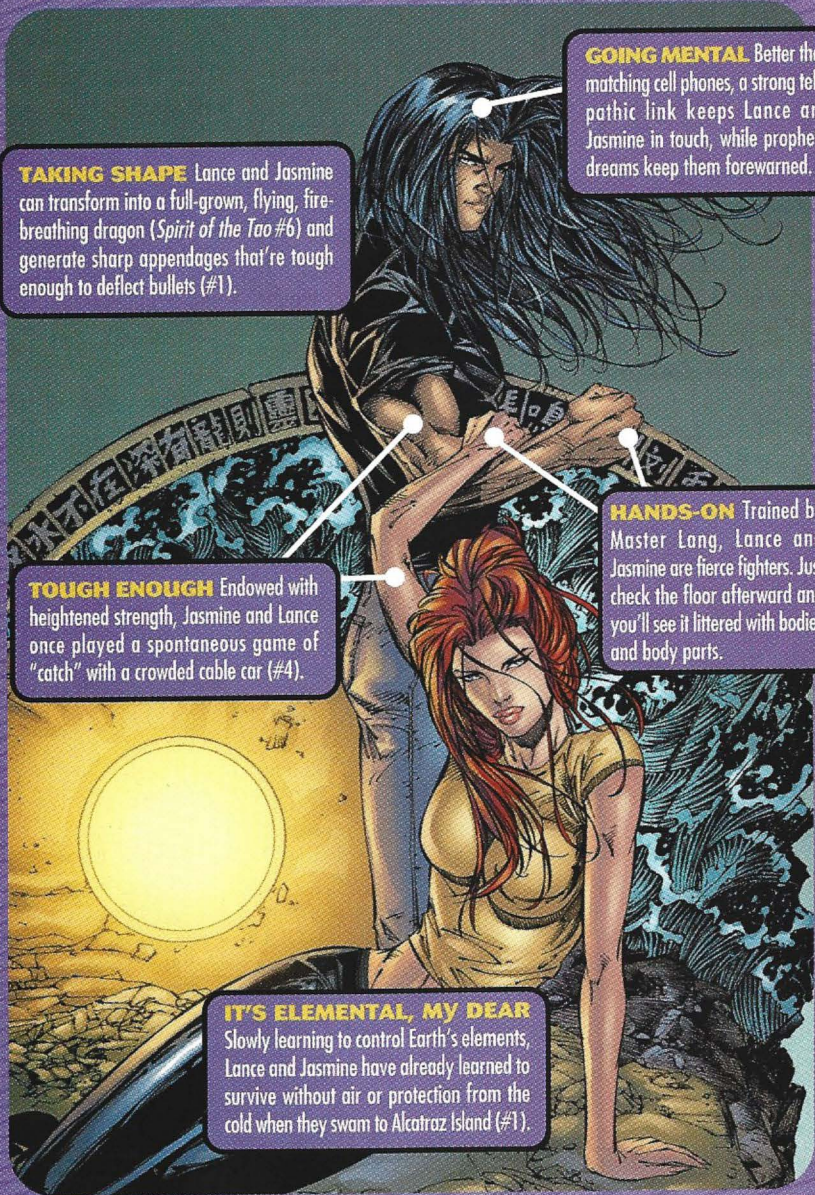
Of course, the Tao Hunters' devious plot is hidden from their human allies, the Jaikap Clan, who fought with the Hunters against the Tao for centuries until they finally trapped the dragon's essence in a cylinder called the Sceptre of the Tao during an ancient battle. Ever since then, the Clan has guarded



ENTER THE DRAGON Mother Nature's defensive system has manifested itself in the form of two humans, Jasmine and Lance (left), who can physically merge and transform into the deadly Tao dragon (above).

CHARACTER PROFILE

LANCE and JASMINE



TAKING SHAPE Lance and Jasmine can transform into a full-grown, flying, fire-breathing dragon (*Spirit of the Tao* #6) and generate sharp appendages that're tough enough to deflect bullets (#1).

GOING MENTAL Better than matching cell phones, a strong telepathic link keeps Lance and Jasmine in touch, while prophetic dreams keep them forewarned.

TOUGH ENOUGH Endowed with heightened strength, Jasmine and Lance once played a spontaneous game of "catch" with a crowded cable car (#4).

HANDS-ON Trained by Master Lang, Lance and Jasmine are fierce fighters. Just check the floor afterward and you'll see it littered with bodies and body parts.

IT'S ELEMENTAL, MY DEAR Slowly learning to control Earth's elements, Lance and Jasmine have already learned to survive without air or protection from the cold when they swam to Alcatraz Island (#1).

LANCE

First Appearance: *Spirit of the Tao* #1

Patient, levelheaded and compassionate, Lance is a member of the Jaikap Clan, which raised him to defend humanity against the Tao. However, Lance is also one of the current incarnations of the Tao itself, which Tan and D-Tron say will increasingly place him in conflict with himself and his dual role as humanity's savior and destroyer in upcoming issues.

JASMINE

First Appearance: *Spirit of the Tao* #1

Also created by the Tao and raised by the Jaikap Clan, Jasmine is Lance's exact opposite. More influenced by the Tao than Lance, Jasmine is hot-tempered, headstrong, impulsive and willing to kill on its behalf, which Tan and D-Tron tease will have increasing ramifications for her relationship with Lance as the series progresses. ■ AP

the Sceptre while seeking a cure for those of its members who have become hideously mutated by exposure to dragon remains called dragon ash.

But 19 years ago, the Sceptre was stolen by humanity's third defender, Joseph Chamberlain, the Head of Project Dynamics (or HPD to his pals). HPD wants to prevent the apocalypse he believes the Tao will cause so he hoped then to destroy the Sceptre before the dragon awoke. But fearing HPD actually planned to release the dragon, not destroy it, the Jaikaps' Grandmaster sent three of his pupils—Jaikap Masters Menicus, Aimy and Lang—to interfere with HPD's plans. The fight ended with Chamberlain's son and Master Aimy both dead, their blood causing the dragon to be reborn as its latest incarnation: the two human babies, Lance and Jasmine.

Escaping with the infants, Lang raised them amongst the Tao-hunting Jaikaps, teaching them to treasure their human side and shun the dragon within. "Lang's at [odds with] everything he holds dear," says D-Tron, "knowing that [his wife] Aimy wanted the Tao to die, but the children are the only things he has left of her."

With so many enemies, who do the dragon spawns (particularly Jasmine, who's beginning to embrace the Tao) have on their side? The Tao hasn't left them without any allies. Just as the dragon spawns are a manifestation of the Tao, so too is the immortal Messiah, who's actually the closest ally Lance and Jasmine have. A tutor to new dragon spawns, "Messiah wants Lance and Jasmine to fully realize their Tao heritage," says D-Tron.

That goal, however, runs against the plans of the new leader of the Jaikap Clan, Menicus, who believes that by gaining control of the dragon ash he could possess the Tao's powers, which would enable him to take over the world.

"Menicus is the real villain of the series," says D-Tron. "Menicus murdered the Grandmaster and set out to obtain the dragon ash, which was his intent from the very beginning."

ANCIENT CHINESE SECRETS

But Menicus isn't the only one who wants the dragon ash. D-Tron and Tan hint that, in the coming months, there'll be an all-out quest for the Tao's power.

"Everyone, including the Tao Hunters, Menicus, Messiah, HPD, Jasmine and Lance, will try to get the dragon ash," says D-Tron.

In the meantime, Lance and Jasmine's Tao abilities will continue to develop, turning them into real forces of nature. "As they become more in tune with the Tao and nature, they'll discover secret powers such as controlling the elements," teases D-Tron. "The Earth will react to them [in the form of] volcanoes, tidal waves, hurricanes [and such]."

Not that big-budget special effects will save them from all the complications ahead. Among other things, HPD is about to reveal a terrible secret contained in a letter of prophecy; his granddaughter Jaime (who bears the code name, Mary III) will discover she's related to Jasmine; and each

time the Tao Dragon manifests, it'll be larger, stronger and meaner. All this leaves the dragon spawns not knowing which way to turn, but of course, everyone's willing to offer their distorted suggestions.

"Messiah will try to manipulate Jasmine after he realizes that Lance has taken humanity's side," says D-Tron, who hints that the Jaikaps, in turn, will continue working on Lance.

With the dragon spawns split up and everyone running in circles, the creators tease that it'll be Menicus who finally gains possession of the dragon ash. But will having the power of the Tao mean being able to control it? Don't bet on it. Already unstable, Messiah's attempts to manipulate the Tao to forge an army of mutants and achieve world conquest will only direct more attention against him.

"Realizing the destruction of life, Jasmine and Lance will join forces with an unlikely ally to stop Menicus," says D-Tron.

But the new ally's identity, and the final fate of humanity for that matter, won't remain a mystery forever. D-Tron promises many more answers—and surprises—by the end of the current series, which he hints could lead into a second series, minus Lance and Jasmine.

"In the end, someone must sacrifice their life to save the world," teases D-Tron, "so don't count on having Lance and Jasmine back as the main characters. They might not be around."



While Seattle-based freelancer Anthony Pearce thinks the Tao dragon's pretty cool, he'll always have a soft spot for Puff the Magic Dragon.

DRAGON PLAYERS

SPIRIT OF THE TAO'S MOVERS AND SHAKERS AT A GLANCE

IN *SPIRIT OF THE TAO*, EVERYBODY'S GOT THEIR OWN AGENDA AND A DIFFERENT VERSION OF THE TRUTH. AND BY THE TIME THE MINI-SERIES ENDS, NO ONE WILL BE IN THE SAME ROLE THEY STARTED IN. TO HELP SORT OUT THE PLAYERS, CREATORS D-TRON AND BILLY TAN GIVE THE SKINNY ON...

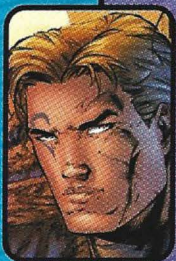


MASTER LANG

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Spirit of the Tao* #1

WHO IS THIS? Lance and Jasmine's adopted father, he's a Jaikap warrior who raised them as humans hoping to keep their violent Tao spirits in check.

WATCH FOR: "He'll undergo dramatic changes," says Tan. "He'll be held against his will and transformed into something he disbelieves in."



MENICUS

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Spirit of the Tao* #1

WHO IS THIS? The new Jaikap leader, Menicus manipulates people in order to gain possession of the dragon ash.

WATCH FOR: "Menicus believes that by ingesting the dragon ash he'll gain the power of the Tao," says D-Tron. "He could control the mutated Jaikaps and conquer the world."



MESSIAH

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Spirit of the Tao* #5

WHO IS THIS? Part of the Tao, Messiah is an immortal who tutors new generations of dragon spawns.

WATCH FOR: "Messiah will try to manipulate Jasmine after he realizes that Lance has taken humanity's side," says D-Tron, "and he'll also try to prevent the Tao Hunters and the Jaikaps from curing the mutated Jaikap members."



THE TAO HUNTERS

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Spirit of the Tao* #1

WHO ARE THEY? Allied to the Jaikaps, this immortal trio of aliens wants to destroy the Earth's immune system for their own secret, devious reasons.

WATCH FOR: "So far, the Tao Hunters have the upper hand," says Tan, "but things might turn around once Lance and Jasmine get a hold of the dragon ash."



JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN (HPD)

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Spirit of the Tao* #2

WHO IS THIS? Plagued by prophetic dreams, Chamberlain believes he's meant to save the world from the Tao.

WATCH FOR: "He'll seek revenge for the death of his son," says Tan. "He'll constantly track the Tao signatures of Lance and Jasmine and hunt them down."



"MARY"

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Spirit of the Tao* #2

WHO IS THIS? An ice-cold mercenary, "Mary" is really HPD's granddaughter, Jaime, and his second-in-command.

WATCH FOR: "We'll be revealing Mary's background, showing her emotional side, and revealing her relationships to Chamberlain and Jasmine," says D-Tron. "She'll have more of an active role in future issues." ■ AP