

GHOST SHELL

**THE OFFICIAL
MOVIE NOVELIZATION**

BASED ON THE COMIC *THE GHOST IN THE SHELL*

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TITAN BOOKS

Ghost in the Shell: The Official Movie Novelization

Print edition ISBN: 9781785657528

E-book edition ISBN: 9781785657535

Published by Titan Books

A division of Titan Publishing Group Ltd

144 Southwark Street, London SE1 0UP

First edition: September 2017

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

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In the future, the line between human and machine is disappearing. Advancements in technology allow humans to enhance themselves with cybernetic parts.

Hanka Robotics, funded by the government, is developing a military operative that will blur the line even further. By transplanting a human brain into a fully synthetic body, they will combine the strongest attributes of human and robot.

PROLOGUE



A NEW SHELL

Who am I?

The question terrified her. It made all the rest of her confusion trivial. She did not know where she was, how she had gotten here, what had happened before.

She also knew that she was being moved, not under her own power. She was being propelled steadily forward. The movement was smooth, and she could see what was above her, so she must be on her back. She could not even tell whether she was in pain. *Something* was surely wrong with her. She was in a white long-sleeved robe made of some light fabric that didn't keep the cold out. She felt like she could not sit up, could not swing her legs. And her breathing wasn't normal. There was some sort of mask over her nose and mouth. The air circulating through it didn't taste right.

There were people around her, on both sides and running along after, all of them dressed in medical gloves, hoods, and protective masks, all colored bright arterial red. As a group, the med team looked like a swarm of red corpuscles, flowing through a vein made of white industrial tile. They all had visors on, each one running a steady stream of holographic data before the medics' eyes.

The medical team also wore hard black semi-vests over their coats, all with a yellow Hanka logo on the back. One man, not part of the team, was wearing a dark suit. He stood to the side, letting the others rush past.

Had she been in an accident? She couldn't remember. She managed to get up one hand to pull her mask off, but a red-gloved hand grasped her wrist and put it down on the gurney, and she didn't have the strength to raise it a second time. There was something made of plastic circling her wrist, though she couldn't bring it up to where she could see it. The object was a clear wristband with a yellow tag that that read PROJECT 2751.

A woman's voice calmly announced over the PA system, "Oxygen levels are dropping." And indeed, she was having trouble breathing. What was wrong? Was she dying? She was aware of her gurney passing through an archway and stopping inside a room.

"Brain function normal," said the woman over the PA system.

So perhaps she didn't have brain damage. But then why wouldn't any clear memories come to her?

And then the room dimmed and thought ceased, so she did not hear the next announcement over the PA system. "Cerebral salvage ready to proceed."

In the operating room, technology reigned supreme. Each piece of cybernetic equipment, gleaming-edged tools and lasers too thin for eyes to track and translucent strands of delicate-looking but powerful transmitters, all moved without the aid of human hands around the young woman, preparing her for the upcoming procedure.

Project 2571's scalp was peeled back cleanly, the skull opened and the brain removed, but the only humans at work were several rooms away, programming the surgical devices moving

in a complicated ballet of exacting incisions and removal.

The subject's human brain, gold techno-enhancements faintly visible against the pink organic matter, was contained cleanly in a black synthetic brain case, which was stamped with the Hanka logo, even though this would not be seen by anyone unless the project terminated. When the brain had been temporarily stabilized and the rest of the associated organic matter had been disposed of, the PA system again broadcast updates of the procedure. "Robotic skeleton prepared and waiting for brain insertion. Initiate Project Two-Five-Seven-One."

Imagine a synthesis of both things, of mechanism and human. Call it *cyborg*. A blending of organic intellect and mechanical perfection, biology's ultimate living computer encased within technology's ultimate physical form. Mind and machine in perfect harmony.

In the Hanka Robotics Corporation, there was a chamber known as the Shelling Room. No humans ever entered it. Every action was completed with rote perfection by synthetic intelligences and flawless computer programs. What took place within the space was of such incredible complexity that a mere human could not hope to control it. Only the machines could truly birth another of their kind. Only they were able to assemble the mechanism with infinite precision and unerring patience.

Deep in a tank of dark liquid, a vertical humanoid skeleton, painstakingly constructed by Hanka scientists, gleamed in the low light. Over the skeletal form made of titanium alloy and hyper-density polymers, artificial organs were placed, gathered in such a way that their functions could both emulate and exceed those of a human. Across the assemblage, a complex web of thread-thin mech-nerves were overlaid and twinned with myomer muscle groups, vat-grown in zero-gravity. Tendrils of composite organic and synthetic materials reached up from the skeleton to connect with compatible translucent filaments reaching down from the incoming brain case.

The mecha-composite slowly began to resemble something human, something feminine, but only in the most abstract sense. It was a diagram from an anatomy book, a skinless horror.

The artificial shell was suspended, adrift and without life or mind. The skull—a layered device, petal upon petal of armored metal and electroactive polymer—unfastened gently. A clockwork action, a music box opening, the petals peeled back until the empty void within was fully revealed.

Cables guided Project 2571's human brain into this new housing. The shroud of meat and bone that it had animated was now gone. The pink matter was swallowed whole by the artificial cranium.

When the cables had released the brain case, the skull closed and the entire body was released to float downward to the bottom of the tank. From inside the surface of the brain case, innumerable fiber-optic tendrils unfurled and quested forth to pierce the protective sack. Connections fused into the biological tissue, building unique neural linkages and bridging the gap between the flesh and the metal. The fibers merged themselves with the dendrites and synapses of the living cerebellum. The interface was completed.

The surgery could have taken place in total darkness, but the scientists felt the need to observe, making sure it was all going as planned. A few red lights within the tank provided illumination for those watching through the viewing portals.

The flow of conductive liquid in the tank was now orchestrated to turn the body onto its back. The pressure pushed the human-shaped form into another tank, this one lit red. Here it was coated with a white substance, a quarter-inch-thick layer of a white cellular/plastic compound that set over the entire body, allowing the layers of skin and flesh and electronics to fuse undisturbed. Each millimeter contained microscopic biomechanical circuitry that would

enable the brain and its host to complete tasks that neither machinery nor humanity on its own could ever achieve. Then the body floated upward in the chamber, gravity turned off so there was no point of contact between the floor and the forming epidermis.

Once the process was complete, the white compound broke up in a multitude of pieces that fluttered away like small, startled birds to reveal the entity beneath. A cyber-mech body, fully artificial in every way, but operated by a thinking, feeling, *living* human mind. There were markings across the new body, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, but these would soon become almost undetectable.

While it was in no way the purpose of the project, most observers would have agreed that 2571 was beautiful. Her features were elfin and delicate in some ways, cold and inviolate in others. She had wide-set eyes, a bow-shaped mouth, breasts that tapered to a firm waist and long, powerful legs. Her skin was pale, which made for a dramatic contrast with her jet-black hair, which came to just below her earlobes.

She had yet to open her new, augmented eyes, looking like a porcelain statue, the lines in the dermal plates that formed her cheeks and her brow barely visible. They faded by the moment as her skin grew more real, more human in tone. Soon she would be indistinguishable from the organic. At least, outwardly, except for the four dark quik-ports in the back of her neck, but so many people had those these days that the ports simply made her look like a functioning member of society. Her form was covered by a transparent sheet, which in turn was covered by the glowing red of the scan-grid running through the conductive material.

Then she was awake again, but just as confused as she had been before. She saw rapidly changing colors—white, yellow, orange, blue—and her fingers trembled. She knew she was moving them, but couldn't feel anything around them. Not comfort, not warmth, not cold, not... anything. Was this normal? All she could remember was... water. She had been sinking in water, it had been cold... A voice spoke. Its owner sounded kind. "Now your eyes are going to open."

Only then did she realize her eyes were closed. She opened them and she could see, but there was still no sensation. It was disturbing.

She was in what looked like a hospital operating room, lying supine on an exam table that was lit from within. A very bright light was directly above her. The doctor who'd spoken now pulled back the sheet. "There. You're safe now." The woman, dressed in bright red scrubs, had warm brown eyes and a welcoming smile.

She realized that there were restraints on her upper arms, keeping her from sitting up. Something was plugged into her neck. And she was having trouble breathing. There was no feeling of air going in, of lungs holding oxygen, of expelling air. She gasped.

"It's okay," the doctor maintained. "Just breathe."

She couldn't stop gasping, hearing how harsh it sounded and still feeling nothing. The doctor repeated, "Just breathe."

She tried to stop fighting her own panic. Her gasps began to subside into raspy inhalations and exhalations.

"Breathe," the doctor said once more.

The rasps became shaky breaths.

The doctor smiled. "Good," she said, her voice soft. "That's good. Hello, Mira." The doctor put a red-gloved hand on the edge of the exam table, as if to demonstrate that she was right here, ready to help if needed.

Mira, she thought. *That's my name*. It sounded unfamiliar to her, but nothing else seemed familiar, either. Certainly this room wasn't. And had she ever met this doctor before?

Maybe not, because the doctor felt the need to introduce herself. "I'm Dr. Ouelet."

Mira focused on the woman. She was perhaps about fifty, with a sympathy in her dark eyes that matched her voice. "Do you remember anything about the attack?"

An attack? That would explain why she was in a hospital. But Mira didn't remember. "What happened?" Then she recalled the water, floating downward in the darkness. She trembled. "I was... I was drowning." The memory hit her then, with force—loss of control, terror, a wave over her head. "There's water!" She gulped reflexively.

"That's right," Dr. Ouelet said. "You were on a boat. A refugee boat."

In Mira's mind, the images formed. She was on a boat with her family, crammed together with many other families. She recalled the sounds—sharp voices arguing, someone laughing, a child crying—and the smell of too many people too long unwashed sharing too small a space. Then there had been a flash, and flames, and a murderous metal scream as the deck ruptured and tilted and water was everywhere...

"It was sunk by terrorists," Dr. Ouelet explained.

The water had been icy, and Mira had been cut by splintering wood. But now she couldn't feel the places where she had been cut, or the temperature in the hospital room, or her fingers and toes, or her breath. It was horrible. "Why can't I feel my body?"

Dr. Ouelet's voice remained gentle. She gave an encouraging smile, as though Mira shouldn't be made afraid by what she said next. "Mira, your body was damaged. We couldn't save it."

That made no sense. An arm, a leg, an eye could be lost. But Mira couldn't be lying here, listening to the doctor, without... But she couldn't feel anything. Not cold air on her face, not the examination table underneath her. She could not feel her lungs, or the pulse of her heart. She gasped and began to tremble.

Dr. Ouelet continued her soft, terrible explanation. "Only your brain survived. We made you a new body. A synthetic shell." Then she smiled and nodded, as if what she was saying was meant to be reassuring. "But your mind, your soul... your 'ghost'..." The doctor lowered her voice to a whisper, as though making it seem like a secret should ease Mira's fears. "It's still in there."

Mira tried to follow what the doctor was saying. She looked around, but there were no clues in this sterile room. Her memories were incoherent. She couldn't remember her family, not really, not why they'd been on the boat or where they had come from, but she remembered being human, being at home in her own skin. This was... this was not...

The synthetic shell, as the doctor called it, did take breaths, but it seemed to need something from Mira to do it properly, and all at once she couldn't. She began hiccupping uncontrollably, and as she couldn't catch her breath, she began shaking, until the shakes became convulsions and her back slammed against the examination table.

Dr. Ouelet stepped back from Mira and gestured to two waiting nurses. "Please." The nurses stepped forward, awaiting instruction. "Sedate her."

The more junior nurse hesitated to use a syringe on a patient who was moving so unpredictably, but the senior nurse commanded, "Put it in her arm. Now."

The junior nurse succeeded in administering the sedative into Mira without having the needle snap off in the patient's jerking arm. The drug took effect almost at once, and Mira's convulsions subsided into shakes, her gasps into small, inarticulate sounds.

Once it was clear that Mira was in no danger, Dr. Ouelet left the operating room and stepped into her office, which was just on the other side of a wide observation window that ran almost the length of the connecting wall. She emitted a tense sigh, not looking forward to the

conversation she was obliged to have with the man who was waiting for her. It was the same man who had been in the corridor when the team had wheeled Project 2571 in for the extraction surgery.

Hanka's chief executive officer Leslie Cutter was in his forties, with dark hair swept back from his forehead. His black suit was almost as expensive as the yellow ocular implant in his right eye and the dark neural enhancer visible in his left temple. In practical terms, the suit had cost him more; as head of Hanka Robotics, he hadn't had to pay anything for his cyberenhancements. "Will it work?" he asked Ouelet.

"Absolutely." Ouelet was proud of her own work, but also proud of how well Mira had withstood the test of having her essence put into its new shell. "She's a miracle." Guessing what Cutter was thinking, Ouelet continued, "A machine can't lead, it can only follow orders. A machine can't imagine, or care, or intuit. But as a human mind in a cybernetic frame, Mira can do all those things... and more." She momentarily looked away from her visitor to study the holographic blue stream of data scrolling down over the window.

When Cutter spoke again, it was clear to Ouelet that he understood the operation was a success—and comprehended almost none of its implications. "The first of her kind. She will join Section Nine as soon as she is operational."

Ouelet tried hard to keep hold of her temper. She and her team had succeeded in creating a new life form, and Cutter simply saw Mira as a tool for law enforcement. "Please, please don't do that. You're reducing a complex human to a machine."

"I don't think of her as a machine." Cutter's voice was bland as he dismissed Ouelet's concerns. "She's a weapon. And the future of my company."

Cutter turned and left. Ouelet turned to look through the observation window at the examining room beyond. Mira was now sleeping peacefully.