
The Possessor Wars

Book 3

The Shadow Warriors

Chad Spencer

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A Brief Note from the Author

When I first went to live in Japan in 1979, most people in the US really didn't know very much about Japanese language and culture. These days, thanks to a lot of excellent movies, anime (animated films and video), and manga (often called "graphic novels" in the US), many people are fans of Japan. I often see high schoolers drawing their own *manga*, *chibi*, and other Japanese-style pop culture art.

In addition, more and more high schools are offering Japanese classes along with the traditional French, German, and Spanish. However, because Japanese is an unfamiliar language to most English-speaking readers, I've included a pronunciation guide at the end of this book. Hopefully, it will help you through any difficulties you might have in dealing with the Japanese words you'll encounter as you read this story. The pronunciation guide contains the Japanese words and names used in this book, and explains how to say them.

For example, the main character is named Miyamoto Akio. In Japan, the family name comes first. It's like calling me Spencer Chad instead of Chad Spencer. Akio's given name, what we would normally call his "first" name, is pronounced ah-key-oh. His family name is pronounced mee-ya-moh-toh. Akio's brother is Miyamoto Akifumi, which is pronounced ah-key-foo-mee.

I know Japanese names might be a little hard for Westerners at first. But if you follow the few simple pronunciation rules I give in the guide at the end of the book, you should get the hang of it quickly.

And thanks for reading *The Shadow Warriors*.

Sincerely,
Chad Spencer

Part 1

What a Wonderful World

“If you have a good life, thank those who came before you. Many people have struggled and suffered to create a better world for their children. We owe them remembrance and respect. In remembering them we must protect and preserve what they left us. In respecting them, we must dedicate ourselves to following their lead and making a better world for those who come after us.” *Thoughts on Life*, Hugh Benson, p. 300. © 2879 Megalon Interstellar Media, All rights reserved in this and all other universes, parallel or unparallel realities, unrealities, and planes of existence.

Akio could not find his mother. That disappointed him because today was his 16th birthday. He more or less expected her to make him a special breakfast. But she was nowhere to be found. He stood in his family's apartment, normally called a flat, and ran his fingers through his thick, black hair. Deciding to see if his twelve-year-old brother was around, he called, "Akifumi?" No answer.

"That probably means I won't get out of chores today," Akio said to no one in particular.

He thought, 'Maybe I can call her and see if she'll let me go surfing.'

Akio activated the family's assistant program. An image of an immaculately dressed woman of about thirty appeared on one of the kitchen wall panels. Like all of the wall panels in the flat, it was also a display screen. The woman on the screen wore a brightly colored kimono—a traditional Japanese robe. "Yes, Akio-san?" the program asked.

"Naomi," he asked, "where is my mother? I need to call her."

"Your mother is in a flower-arranging seminar," the program replied. "She cannot be contacted at this time."

"Do you know where Akifumi went?"

"He went to the marina," Naomi answered. "He said to tell you that he is ready to go feed the fish."

"That's what I'm trying to get out of," Akio fumed.

"I'm sorry," Naomi apologized, clasping her hands and bowing sympathetically. "I am not programmed to respond in that area."

Akio snapped, "End program." Naomi disappeared and the panel displayed a scene of a traditional Japanese castle set in a green countryside.

There was only one possibility left, and Akio knew it. He cringed at the thought, but he told himself, "There's no other choice. I'll have to ask Father." He knew exactly where his father was. After all, it was Saturday morning and there was only one possible place to find his father on Saturday morning.

Akio squared his shoulders, went to the entry of his family's flat, slipped on his sandals, and strode firmly out. His father was there, as he was every Saturday morning. He knelt in the wide corridor next to the front door. As always, Akio's father didn't look up as Akio appeared. With precise movements, Akio's father fastidiously pruned the small plants in the alcove by the doorway.

Knowing better than to interrupt his father, Akio waited for him to finish. Several minutes passed as Akio shifted from foot to foot and watched his father work on his bonsai display. The small trees, bushes, rocks, pond, and stream in the display looked exactly like a full-sized landscape. The oak appeared to be a huge, twisted old tree. Except that it wasn't. Instead, the carefully sculpted plant was only two and a half feet high. Everything in the display was a miniature version of what a real landscape might contain.

Akio's father didn't turn around, but he surprised Akio by asking, "Do you know why every flat in our arcology has a bonsai display on the right side of its front door?"

As always, his father spoke to Akio in Japanese, even though their first language was English. Both Akio and his father grew up on Earth in the United States. Although Akio's Japanese was much better than his father's, neither of them spoke it natively.

“N ... no,” Akio stuttered, also speaking in Japanese. “I just figured it was the way things were around here.”

His father was silent for a few moments. Akio shuddered, knowing that his father didn't approve of his answer. Just when Akio was starting to sweat a little, his father said, “You need to have more curiosity about the world around you.”

Akio stood in abashed silence. Then his father explained, “We do this because it is uniquely Japanese. It was our ancestors who invented and perfected bonsai. Many people around the galaxy practice this art, but it is we who must preserve what is uniquely ours. It has become a tradition in all arcologies in this star system for every family to have a bonsai display on the right side of the entry.”

Trying to redeem himself, Akio interjected, “I suppose it's also because it teaches patience.”

“Indeed it does,” was his father's encouraging reply.

‘Whew,’ thought Akio. Finally feeling bold enough, he asked, “Father?”

“Yes?”

“Today is my birthday.”

“Indeed it is.”

“I was wondering ... ”

“Wondering?”

“Yes, well ... you see ... I was wondering if I could skip tending the fish pens this morning and go surfing with some of my friends. Since ... since it's my birthday.”

His father didn't look up or answer. He just continued to gingerly snip at the plants in the display.

“The feeder bins are getting low,” his father replied at last. “They need to be replenished. Akifumi is waiting for you at the berth.”

Akio's shoulders slumped. “Yes Father,” he sighed. “I'll go now.”

Entering their flat, Akio slipped out of his sandals, went to his room, and changed from his kimono into shorts, and a shirt. Peeking into the cryofreezer, he found a *bento* lunch that his mother had made for him. Grabbing that and a large thermos of cold green tea, Akio retrieved his backpack from his room. Next, he went to the door and pulled his beach shoes from the cabinet in the *genkan* entryway. When he had them on, he stuffed his lunch in his backpack and left.

As Akio walked past his father, his father instructed, “Akifumi will drive the Turtle.”

“Yes, Father,” Akio replied meekly as he walked away.

Akio went to the nearest elevator, which ran along the outside of the arcology. As the elevator rose toward the surface of the ocean, he watched the shoals of fish swim by through the clear elevator tube.

At level 150, the elevator reached the waterline and Akio got off. He caught a hovertram to the marina. The ornately decorated tram trundled along a few feet above the floor. It was crammed with old women in black or dark blue kimomos. Each one was carrying a mesh net shopping bag as they departed for a morning of hunting through the arcology's markets. Akio stood in the back near the exit. Fuming with frustration and impatience, he clenched a ring hanging from the ceiling to steady himself. After what seemed like three or four days, the tram heaved itself to a halt at his stop. Akio bolted down the steps.

In a few bounds, Akio was outside the arcology and standing on a broad floating dock. The morning sunshine streamed down from a perfectly blue sky. The day was still

quite cool for the tropics. But then, the morning was always cool until both suns came up.

Akio paused, as he usually did when he came outside, and gazed for a moment at the endless azure expanse of water and sky. The arcology, which was a self-contained city that was home to about three million people, floated behind him in the deep ocean. Half of its 300 stories were below the waterline. The other 150 stories towered upward. Turning, Akio squinted because of the sunlight glinting off the mammoth structure's many windows. Even though he'd lived here for two years, it was still hard to believe that something as large as the arcology could float.

This arcology, unlike the one Akio was born in on Earth, was long and comparatively slender. It was shaped almost like a huge ship. Massively thick cables held the arcology to even more massive anchors placed down on the bottom of the ocean. Wide docks and walkways floated on the ocean's surface around the arcology. Even this early in the morning, there were quite a few people out and about. Akio faced the sea again.

A large marina stretched away to his right. He could see flocks of seagulls hovering over the far end of the collection of boats, ships, and other vehicles. The birds hung on the wind, screeching for tidbits from the fishing boats parked along the marina's outer edge. To Akio it all seemed so natural. But he knew that both the birds and the fish were brought here to the planet Yokohama from Earth centuries ago.

Cheered by the sunshine, Akio shuffled off toward his family's berths. After about five minutes of walking, he reached the spot where their watercraft was moored. Akifumi was in the water next to the family's Turtle putting on a mask and pair of fins.

Seeing Akio, Akifumi yelled in English, "Whales!" Akifumi pointed downward into the water. He continued, "Whales are passing underneath!" Slipping a gillbreather into his mouth, Akifumi jerked the mask onto his face and dove underwater. Akio wasn't worried about him. An expansive underwater latticework of strong nets kept out the sharks and other large predators. And with the gillbreather, Akifumi could stay underwater for hours.

Glancing around, Akio noticed another vehicle parked behind the Turtle. "A Barracuda!" he gasped, awestruck. "Where did that come from?"

He strode to the fish-shaped watercraft and examined it enviously. "Of course," he muttered to himself, "whoever owns this will have to move it. These are our family's berths. No one else can park here."

Akifumi resurfaced. Spitting his gillbreather into his hand, he yelled, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY! So what do you think of your present?"

"MY PRESENT? You mean *this* is for *me*?" He pointed to the Barracuda incredulously.

"Sure," Akifumi replied. "Who did you *think* it was for? Mom and Dad wanted you to be surprised." He looked behind Akio and asked, "Didn't you?"

Akio whirled around to see his parents smiling behind him. "Happy birthday Akio" his mother congratulated. His father grinned and said, "Did you think we forgot?"

Akio just beamed.

"Are you going to take it for a drive?" his father asked.

"THANK YOU!" Akio hooted with joy as he bounded onto the Barracuda's saddle, which was just behind its head. The vehicle's computer instantly reacted by activating its control display, which was in front of the saddle. Grabbing the two steering handles,

Akio squeezed down on one of the thumb buttons on the left handle and the barracuda-shaped craft rose into the air. Its eyes glowed a soft blue, the color of the sea and the sky.

“We still have to fill the fish feeders!” Akifumi cautioned. “Dad said I could drive the Turtle.”

“Drive it then,” Akio called out as he eased the steering handles slightly frontward. The Barracuda wafted forward. He slid the vehicle away from the dock and outward toward the open ocean. The Barracuda’s body rippled gently back and forth in a slightly serpentine motion as if it were a real fish swimming gracefully through water.

Glancing over his shoulder, Akio saw Akifumi in the two-passenger front seat on the Turtle’s large upper shell. The Turtle rose unhurriedly from the water and slowly lumbered forward, its flippers rising and lowering as the chunky craft turned. Beyond the Turtle, his parents waved from the dock. Grinning from ear to ear, Akio waved back.

Guiding the Barracuda toward the open ocean, Akio shoved the steering handles forward as far as they would go. The vehicle responded by jerking ahead, almost knocking him off. Akio whooped his delight as the wind thundered in his ears. Gently sliding the levers, he made the Barracuda skim lightly in alternating directions—left, right, left, right.

Akio pulled a tight arc to the right, his heart pounding. He gripped the saddle with his legs and leaned into the turn. As he came around, he could see Akifumi far off in the distance making his way northward along the arcology’s hull, moving toward the feed store. Knowing he needed to join his brother, Akio headed in the same direction—at top speed, of course. Reaching Akifumi, Akio let out a wild, “Whooo! It’s fantastic! This thing *screams*.”

With obvious envy, Akifumi replied, “That saddle seats two. How about taking me for a ride after we’re done?”

Nodding, Akio pulled up beside Akifumi and matched the Turtle’s slow pace. They arrived at the feed store together. Akio slid from the Barracuda’s saddle onto the wide dock that the feed store was built on. As he went inside to talk to Nakajima-san, the store’s owner, he glanced over his shoulder and saw Akifumi press a button on the Turtle’s control console. The Turtle’s wide top shell popped open, revealing its cargo hold.

Akio emerged from the store moments later with Kasumi, the owner’s daughter. Kasumi silently and awkwardly ambled to a silo next to the store. As always, she gazed toward her feet when she walked, causing her short hair to hang down and hide most of her face. She almost seemed as if she was about to trip on the hem of her *yukata*, the light summer robe she wore.

“Kasumi is so skinny,” Akio recalled a girl at school joking, “that she has to stand up three times to make a shadow. What guy would ever want someone like her?”

Akio always felt bad for her. She seemed nice to him, but the others at school had different opinions.

When Kasumi reached the silo, she motioned to Akifumi, and muttered, “*Koko desu*.” (Over here.) Nodding, Akifumi slid the Turtle forward and parked it under the long tube that hung out from the side of the silo. Kasumi punched a button on the silo’s control panel and fish food cascaded down through the tube into the cargo hold of the Turtle. When it was full, Kasumi mumbled, “*Maido*.” (As always, thanks.)

Silently, Kasumi turned and plodded her way back to the store. After she disappeared inside, Akifumi commented, “She never really talks to us.”

Akio shrugged. "She's the same at school. She's in my grade. We've been in the same class a few times. She never talks to anyone. She just reads all the time."

"She must be smart."

"I guess," Akio replied as he shrugged again and climbed onto the Barracuda. Akifumi got back into the driver's seat of the Turtle, and the two of them guided their vehicles slowly away from the dock. As they left the arcology behind, Akifumi told Akio, "I know you want to take that thing out for spin." Akio grinned and nodded. "Go ahead. Just meet me at the fish pens and help me with the feeding."

Nodding again, Akio zipped away from his brother. For about half an hour, Akio sped across the open ocean, dodged waves, chased seabirds, and just generally enjoyed his new toy. All too soon, he made his way to his family's fish pens.

Akifumi was there, already shoveling food into one of the feeders. Without a word, Akio pulled up, dismounted, and climbed onto the rim of the floating pen. Inside the large enclosure, the water churned as hundreds of tuna vied for the food being discharged from the feeder. Akio grabbed a shovel and helped his brother scoop the food out of the Turtle. He and his brother worked comfortably together as they so often had done before. The living sea whispered softly to them as wave after wave rose and fell. Wild fish, brought from various worlds around the Federated Alliance, clustered around the fish cage in hopes of nabbing stray bits of fish food that Akio and his brother might drop. By now, both suns were up and it truly felt like a morning in the tropics.

When they were done with the first feeder, they moved on from feeder to feeder until the Turtle was empty. Then they went back to the feed store for another load of fish food. After another trek to the fish pens to fill more feeders, they made their way to the feed store for their third and final load. By the time they emptied the Turtle for the last time, it was well after noon.

The two brothers sat on the edge of a fish pen, eating their lunch. Akio was pleased to find that his mother had put many of his favorite foods into his *bento*.

"So you like the Barracuda," Akifumi said around a mouthful of food.

"What do you think?" was Akio's reply.

"I think I want one too."

Smiling, "I think you probably won't get one until you're sixteen. These things aren't cheap."

Glumly, Akifumi agreed, "I think you're right."

Finishing his lunch, Akio commented, "I think I'll go for a ride."

"I think I know where you're going," Akifumi countered.

"I think you better mind your own business," Akio shot back with mock gruffness.

"I think there's a girl you want to see."

"I think you better mind your own business," repeated Akio, this time with less humor.

Akifumi just smiled slyly and told him, "I'm going to the atoll. I've got both our surfboards in the back seat in case you want to come and surf after you've seen her." Akifumi stuffed the last of his lunch into his mouth, jumped down from the pen into the driver's seat of the Turtle, and slowly drifted away.

Finishing his last *onigiri*, a triangular rice ball wrapped in dried seaweed, Akio hopped onto the Barracuda and turned toward the south end of the arcology. The Barracuda seemed to hum with anticipation, as if it knew where he was going. The twin suns smiled down on Akio, and the contented sea rolled blissfully beneath him.

Akio glided the Barracuda along the myriad of docks that floated around the outside of the arcology until he reached the park at its southern-most end. Built on massive floating platforms, the park boasted acres of grass, trees, gardens, and low hills. A stout breakwater formed a floating barrier that protected the park from the waves when storms arose. Akio navigated to a gap in the breakwater and slid his Barracuda inside. Turning north, he followed the wide channel between the breakwater and the park. Couples in small, paddle-wheeled boats pedaled along the edge of the park in the gap. Each couple floated in their own little world, oblivious to Akio as he was to them. His attention was focused far down the channel.

As he reached the end of the channel, Akio slowed. He let the Barracuda settle into the water about fifty yards north of where the park formed a low, grassy hill. He pulled a rag from his backpack and started polishing the Barracuda's back. He worked slowly and carefully—as carefully as his father had on the bonsai display. Stopping, he pulled his comPod out of his backpack and glanced at the time on its display. 'Not much longer,' he thought.

Before he could grow impatient, a girl in an ornate, flowing kimono came over the top of the hill followed by five attendants. Two attendants immediately set about laying out woven mats to prepare a place for their mistress to sit. The other three, who were carrying intricately woven baskets, worked at the preparations for a meal.

The first girl stood near the brow of the hill, waiting and gazing out to sea. Akio pretended to be busily cleaning the Barracuda, but he glanced toward her as often as possible. He could see her kimono gradually change its color and pattern. A crane that appeared to be woven into the cloth flew along the hem of her robe. The gentle wind caressed her long hair. She smiled at the endless blue sky. Akio felt as if his heart would stop.

"Who is she?" a male voice asked suddenly in English, causing Akio to jump so much that he nearly fell into the water.

Wildly, Akio cast around for the source of the voice. There stood the oddest-looking Japanese guy Akio had ever seen. He wore a tall stovepipe hat and a tailcoat. Both were deep purple. His pale blue shirt had ruffles down the front and he was wearing a *bow tie*, of all things. His blue trousers were common in the Federated Alliance, but not in Japanese space. His footwear was also eccentric. He wore a pair of knee-length, purple boots. As far as Akio remembered, he had never seen a real person wearing clothes like that. He knew them only from pictures in history books and dramas set in ancient times.

The stranger, who appeared to be the same age as Akio, gazed calmly back at him. He didn't seem to notice the panic he had caused.

"Wha ... what?" Akio stammered. "Who ... who are you?"

"Zeniya Rikiya," the stranger answered. "But I go by Rick. I could tell just by looking that you speak English too. You sound American."

"Yeah," Akio answered hesitantly. "I'm Miyamoto Akio. We lived on Earth in the U.S. until two years ago."

"You're short," Rick stated bluntly. "You must be real Japanese."

"I'm not that short," Akio shot back hotly. "I'm five foot nine."

"Yeah," Rick answered in an uninterested monotone, "but these days there's hardly any Japanese under six foot. I'm six six. Did your parents come from Japan?"

"No, my grandparents."

"They must have been Unmodified."

“Of course! My whole family’s Unmodified.”

“Wow,” Rick said, “you’re rare.”

“So what’s it to you?”

“Nothing. I just think it’s cool.”

“Cool? What do you mean, cool?”

“It’s a slang word. People have been using it for centuries. It means good. It means I’m impressed to finally meet a real Japanese, not just someone who pretends to be Japanese.”

Puzzled, Akio demanded, “What do you mean? We’re *all* Japanese here.”

“Not me,” Rick disagreed. “I’m Modified, like most everyone else. And I’m not Japanese, I’m Canadian.”

“Canadian? You look Japanese to me.”

“I *look* Japanese. But that doesn’t *make* me Japanese. I’m Canadian. I was born and raised in Canadian space. Canadians can look like anything.” Rick changed the subject abruptly by asking, “So who’s the chick?” He jerked his head in the direction of the group of girls on the hill.

Confused, Akio repeated, “Chick?”

“Chick, bird, babe, girl.”

Akio stole a glance toward the hill. “Her name is Hikaru. Fujiwara Hikaru. She goes to the same school as me.”

Rick stared openly at Hikaru and her attendants. “Humph,” he commented. “She’s a looker. I like how the vidcloth of her kimono keeps changing colors and designs.” He paused a moment, continuing to survey the group of girls. “The others are androids, aren’t they?”

Surprised, Akio looked at them as well. “I ... I don’t know. They look human to me. But they don’t go to our school.”

“Definitely androids,” Rick affirmed. Their faces are too perfect to be human. You can always recognize them because they don’t have as much variation in their skin tones as humans. She must be really, really rich to afford five androids.”

Akio shrugged. He returned to polishing his Barracuda.

“Nice ride,” Rick said.

It took a second, but Akio realized that Rick was complimenting his Barracuda. Its silver surface seemed to sparkle in reply.

“I just got it today.” Akio explained.

“So what, you can’t decide between your ride and your girl?” Rick asked. “You could have both if you just put her on the back and took her for a spin.”

“Well ... I suppose ... but ... ”

“But you never have actually talked to the girl,” Rick finished for him.

“No!” Akio denied hotly. “Of course I’ve talked to her.”

Rick grinned slyly. “A few times at school, maybe.”

“Well ... ”

“Yeah, I know how it is. I’m not good with the girls either. They all think I’m from some alternate dimension or something.”

“Hmm ... I wonder why,” Akio said as he gazed at Rick’s clothes.

“Hey!” Rick replied. “This stuff is fashionable all across the Yukon Cluster.”

“You’re a long way from the Yukon Cluster, and the people around here try to be as traditionally Japanese as possible.”

Rick grimaced. "I know. They're all pretending. But not you. You're real Japanese and you're wearing American clothes."

Akio shrugged. "I guess I never thought about it. I just wear what I like."

"Me too," Rick agreed, "but the girls don't seem to see it that way."

They were interrupted by a hissing sound from the ocean outside the breakwater. Rick started in surprise, but Akio assured him, "It's just the *suisakura*. They rise up from the underwater forests and release their blossoms every day for about three months a year. People come here for *hanami*."

"What's *hanami*?"

"Sitting on the grass and watching the petals fall from the *suisakura*. It's pretty fun actually. It looks ... cool ... and there's always a lot to eat. My family does it a lot on Sundays during this time of year."

The *suisakura* now towered above the breakwater. Pink petals danced in intricate swirls as they descended lightly on the soft breeze. Akio could see Hikaru gazing upward with an expression of pure joy on her face. His heart seemed to stop.

"Go up there," Rick urged. "Go talk to her."

"I ... no ... I have to finish cleaning my Barracuda."

"No you don't. You said you just got that thing. There's not a spot on it. Why don't you go talk to her?"

From behind Rick, a male voice mocked, "Because she doesn't hang out with fishmongers, and he knows his place."

Rick whirled around. Akio recognized the three intruders immediately. "What do you mean by that, Goda?"

"I mean your place is grubbing around in the fish pens, *chibi-chan*."

Rick interjected, "What's wrong with working the fish pens? You some kinda snob?"

"I don't *have* to be a snob," Goda retorted. "I'm better than him." He eyed Rick momentarily, and then asked, "What are you supposed to be?"

"Human, unlike you."

Goda bristled and stomped up toward Rick, "What did you say to me, freak? Why can't you be more Japanese and wear a kimono like the rest of us?"

"Because I'm not a mindless slugwroth like you."

"What'd you say to me freak?" Goda repeated, moving forward until his chest butted up against Rick's. He glared upward into Rick's face.

Rick whipped out a comPod and touched an icon on its display. He held it up into Goda's face. "I said smile for the nice policeman. He can see you on my comPod's camera."

"*Moshi moshi*," a man's voice said from the comPod. Goda backed off. Rick looked into his display and said, "Sorry, I pushed the wrong button." He hung up.

"How come you're sticking up for *chibi-chan*?" Goda demanded, pointing at Akio.

He looked at Akio. "What does *chibi-chan* mean? My Japanese isn't that great."

One of Goda's sidekicks broke in. "It means 'Shorty'. We call him Shorty. Don't you know nuthin'?"

"Wow," Rick replied calmly, "a talking gorilla."

Clenching his fists, the 'talking gorilla' advanced on Rick and Akio as he yelled, "*Kono yaro!*" (I'm gonna pound you!)

Rick held up his comPod, his finger poised over the icon that would call the police.

"Oi! Higashiyama, stop," commanded Goda. "These two aren't worth it."

Rick snorted in disgust. "Look at you three," he reviled, "pretending to be Japanese. You're not real Japanese, you're Modified. Not like him." He jerked his thumb at Akio. "He's *real*."

"What's he talking about, Minoru?" the lumbering Higashiyama asked Goda.

"So he's Unmodified," Goda derided, "who cares? It doesn't make him *real* Japanese. He's from America."

Rick let out another derisive snort. "Stop pretending to be something you're not. Just because you were born in Japanese space and you've got Japanese faces doesn't make you the real thing. His family survived the War while our ancestors dug in on Mars and did nothing. You gotta be *real* Japanese to be that kind of survivor. We Modifieds have always had it soft."

"That's not true!" hissed Goda. "My ancestors built a huge conglomerate that spans *entire* star systems. They worked hard. My father's the head of the Goda Group."

"Big deal," Rick taunted. "Your family got a good start because they avoided the War. Who cares? And if your family is so wonderfully rich, what are you doing on this planet? Why aren't you in the System Capital on Edo?"

"None of your business, you jarking veech!" Goda and his friends moved to surround him. Akio stood up on his Barracuda and got ready to jump the three feet that separated him from the park.

Rick was unafraid, "Jark off! You want your rich, snobby daddies to have to come and drag you out of jail? That won't look good for the Goda Gang."

"Group!" Goda hissed, "We're a conglomerate, not a gang!"

"Group, gang, what's the difference? Either way, your daddy's gonna be out for blood when he finds you in jail."

Goda's eyes narrowed. "Nishimoto, Higashiyama, we're done with these chongpeths. Let's go."

Goda stomped away. Nishimoto and Higashiyama trailed along behind, scowling over their shoulders at Rick and Akio.

Rick watched them go. "What's a chongpeth?" he asked Akio.

Disgustedly, Akio answered, "It's a type of rat-like mole from the planet Tay-Jik Quartus in the Lidyolow 9 System. They build big colonies out of the dung of other animals."

"Nice," Rick replied, smiling. "I'll have to remember that one. If I cared at all what that idiot said, I might even be insulted. Oh hey, your girlfriend left."

Akio looked up to the hill and saw that Rick was right. Deflated, Akio said, "I guess I'll go surf with my brother. Want to come along?"

"No way, man. I don't surf, I ski in the snow."

"Ski?" Akio asked. "I don't even know what that means."

"That's ok. I'll pull up some video and show you on my comPod next time I see you here."

"How did you know I'd be back here?"

Rick jerked his head toward the hill. "If the girl comes back, you'll be back." He smiled, waved, and walked away across the lush grass.

Akio climbed back into the saddle of his Barracuda and headed for the open ocean. In about forty minutes, he arrived at the place where his brother had parked the Turtle. Climbing onto the larger vehicle, Akio retrieved his surfboard from the back seat. He

pulled off his shirt and beach shoes, tossed them into the back seat of the Turtle, and hopped into the chest-deep water.

On the entire planet of Yokohama, there was no land at all. In some places however, there were underwater atolls where the ocean bottom rose almost high enough to break the water's surface at low tide. The atoll where Akio and his friends surfed was one such place. It was the only spot he had ever been to on this planet where the water wasn't over his head.

The atoll consisted of a group of coral reefs where the waves broke perfectly for surfers. When humans arrived in this system hundreds of years ago, they found Yokohama to be ideal for Earth's marine life. They brought plankton, fish, whales, dolphins, and many other aquatic life forms from Earth. They also brought coral, and genetically engineered it to grow quickly. These days, vast coral reefs surrounded the deep channels where the arcologies floated. The reefs protected the arcologies from the towering waves kicked up by the huge storms that swept across the endless oceans in the winter.

Akio spent the rest of the afternoon catching wave after wave and demonstrating why everyone called him the Surf Maniac. As the afternoon slid into evening, Akio and Akifumi happily made their way home, knowing that their mother had prepared a special meal for Akio's birthday.

In the evening, while Akifumi did the dishes, Akio approached his father with a question.

“Father?”

“Yes?”

“Does it matter that we’re Unmodified?”

“To many people it does.”

“Why?”

“Do you know what Unmodified means?”

“Sure,” Akio replied. “It means we haven’t been genetically modified. But I thought genetic engineering was illegal anyway.”

“It is now, but it wasn’t then.”

“When?”

Akio’s father heaved a sigh in the exact way that made Akio cringe. “Akio, I sometimes wonder about you. You read faster than nearly any living human, yet you hardly read. You’re smarter than all the other kids your age, yet you don’t make the effort to know things.”

Embarrassed, Akio dropped his gaze to the floor and shuffled his feet.

Sighing again deeply, Akio’s father explained. “In the late 21st Century, our ancestors were among the first to establish colonies in space. We had a space station in orbit around the Earth’s moon not long after the Americans built theirs. Then we built a self-sustaining colony on Mars before anyone else. In 2188, WWII began. It was an investigative team from Japan that proved that the U.S. and India did not start the war. Rather, it was started by Vong Levendakis. Once everyone knew the truth, Levendakis tried to take revenge by exterminating every living human in Japan. He nearly succeeded. At the start of the war, there were over 150 million Japanese. By the time it ended, there were less than ten million survivors in Japan. We are their descendants.”

“While that was happening,” Akio’s father continued, “the colony on Mars did very little. Actually, there really wasn’t anything they could do until the war ended. Without supplies from Earth, the colony couldn’t do much more than sustain its three million residents. It was almost exactly 100 years before humanity went back into space. During that time, the Mars colony established a highly advanced technical society. It was they who were the first to attain space travel again. They made their way back to Earth to find that our ancestors had not only survived, but had successfully managed to defend Japan from being taken over by Russia, China, Korea, and Australia. Our ancestors overcame all obstacles and fought off those who would take what is ours. They succeeded in the face of extinction. That tradition has been passed down to you and I. We must do our best to honor them by preserving what they left us and by facing the universe as they did.”

Akio stared at his father blankly, “So ... what about the Modifieds?”

His father replied, “During the 100 years the colony was on its own, the people there began a program of genetic modification to improve their offspring. They wanted to make them taller, stronger, faster, smarter, and so on. Many of the Modified children turned out to be superior humans. Unfortunately, the colonists didn’t understand

genetics as well as they thought. Modifieds have more birth defects than Unmodified humans. Many of those defects kill them before they reach adulthood. The ones that live are generally healthy, tall, and smart. But insanity sometimes runs in their families.”

“Insanity?” Akio gasped.

“Yes,” his father answered as he nodded gravely. “That’s why all Japanese who are more than one-quarter Modified, which is most Japanese in the colonies, have to undergo mental health screenings every year.”

“I didn’t know that,” Akio stated. “I have lots of Modified friends. No one ever told me.”

“They don’t like to talk about it.”

“So is that why it’s a big deal that we’re Unmodified?”

“Partially,” his father explained. “But it’s also important for choosing marriage partners.”

“What?”

“Unmodifieds are desirable marriage partners. We have healthier offspring. The children generally get the intelligence and physical speed and strength from their Modified parent. And from the Unmodified, they get better health, fewer birth defects, and mental and genetic stability.”

Akio pondered his father’s words. ‘Speed and strength?’ he thought. ‘Is that why Goda always beats me at *kendo*? How in the universe am I supposed to compete against someone that’s Modified?’

For a moment, neither Akio nor his father spoke. Then his father gingerly said, “It’s good that you brought this up. I was going to discuss these things with you.”

Surprised, Akio asked, “Why?”

“Because Unmodifieds are very desirable marriage partners.”

Eyes widening, Akio asserted, “I’m a little young for *that*.”

Nodding, his father replied, “That’s true. But it’s not too early to make arrangements.”

With mounting anxiety, Akio demanded, “Arrangements? What arrangements?”

“Arrangements for your marriage,” his father said calmly. “People who are 100% Unmodified are very rare in the colonies. So in the colonies, it’s normal for the marriages of Unmodifieds to be arranged by their parents.”

Horrified, Akio asked, “You’re gonna pick who I marry? You can’t do that! Can you?”

His father smiled and told him soothingly, “Don’t worry. Your mother and I won’t do anything without your agreement. We can’t *force* you to marry anyone. But now that you’ve turned 16, you can begin to date. Families from all over the arcology, maybe even all over this star system, will begin to approach us about making arrangements for you to marry their daughters. They will offer large gifts of money to you, and a large dowry to us.”

“What’s a dowry?”

“It’s money that a Modified family pays to the parents of an Unmodified to make a marriage.”

“You’re gonna *sell* me?”

Chuckling and running his hand through his full head of white hair, Akio’s father answered, “Absolutely. For as much as we can possibly get.”

Akio made choking noises. He felt himself turning purple.

Laughing now, Akio's father reassured him, "*Of course* we're not going to sell you. We wouldn't do anything like that. It's just that families will approach us and ask for you to meet their daughters. And now that you're 16, the Reproductive Allowance laws allow you to date. So you may start to get more ... attention from the girls at school."

"Well, just meeting girls is ok I guess," Akio mused, feeling more relieved. "And more attention from the girls at school? They've *never* paid much attention to me in all the time we've been here. They always like the taller guys."

"They also like boys who are not quite so ... energetic as you."

"What do you mean?"

Akifumi, who had finished the dishes and slipped up behind them to listen, suddenly blurted out, "You're weird." Akio and his father turned to look at Akifumi, who continued, "That's why the girls don't like you so much. You can hardly sit still, and you don't study or listen in school. You're too into adventure games in the AR suite. It's all you talk about. Well, that and surfing and *kendo* and *karate*. Most girls really aren't interested in those things."

"That's not true," Akio countered. "Plenty of girls surf. Harriet surfs. And Ally Wilson back on Earth was into martial arts. And our cousin Chinami is into adventure games."

"Yeah but most girls aren't like them," Akifumi responded. "Most girls are into more serious stuff."

"What makes *you* such an expert on girls?" Akio demanded.

Airily, Akifumi replied, "I'm very popular with the girls at my school. Ask anybody."

Their father cut off Akio before he could reply, "In any case, you need to show people your more mature side. The families of potential spouses must see that you are level-headed and will someday be able to support whomever you marry."

Akio withered. "Support? How about she supports me? She can have a career instead of me. And anyway, I'm too young to think about that kind of stuff."

In a resigned tone, his father corrected him, "It's never too early to plan for the future, Akio."

Throwing up his hands, Akio said, "I think I need to go kill some Remulons. Akifumi, you coming?"

Akifumi nodded and followed Akio as he made his escape from their flat.

Akio stood waist-deep in foul-smelling, mucky water. The choking mist that brooded over the humid swamp blocked most of the light coming from the three ragged moons. Gripping his sword tightly, he did his best to move forward without making a sound. Overhead he could hear the buzzing of viperbugs, searching for him. Knowing that they could see the infrared heat of his body through the oppressive vapors, he lowered himself into the hot, bubbling mire to blend his heat pattern with that of the churning water.

Not far across the marsh, Akio heard the approach of the Remulon soldiers. Their Commander hissed orders to his underlings. Akio slid himself under the huge sticky leaves of a deathly brown plant protruding from the water. He froze as the enemy steadily drew closer, moving in on him on all sides. The overbearing stench of the vile plant he hid under made him want to gag and cough. But if he did, the Remulons would find him immediately.

Pulling the leaves tighter around his head, Akio waited. A Remulon soldier squashed its way through the muck until it stood a mere three feet from him. It squinted all five of its eyes, trying to see through the haze.

“It’sssss here!” the Remulon called to its compatriots. “The human issss somewhere closssse.”

Something splashed in the water up ahead. The Remulons opened fire on the source of the noise, vaporizing every living thing in the target area. The water thrashed into an explosion of steam from the volley of energy.

“Ceasssse fire!” the Remulon Commander called. The swamp fell into a tomb-like silence.

A soldier called out, “It mussst be dead. Nothing could have ssssurvived that.”

“It appearsssss you are right,” the Commander agreed. “Return to bassse.”

The squad moved off. Akio waited until the sound of them squashing through the muck faded away. Quickly, he made for the far shore. Climbing onto the bank, Akio stayed well hidden in the underbrush until he reached the Remulon lair. The outer fence was a tangle of stiff, vine-like creepers with poisonous thorns. Behind that, an inner wall of obsidian loomed overhead.

‘The entrance will be on the other side,’ thought Akio, ‘close to the mountain road. That’ll be heavily guarded. I’ve got to get in this side without alerting them.’

Checking to ensure that there were no Remulons around, Akio slid quietly up to the thorny barrier and sheathed his sword. He put his hands together and whispered, “Alchemy activate.” A pale glow formed in his hands. He placed them both flat on the damp ground next to the thorny plants.

A rocky staircase formed between him and the outer fence, arching itself over the top. He quickly ascended. When he arrived at the uppermost step, he was past the thorns, so he simply jumped the thirty or so feet to the ground.

He landed poised, ready to fight any Remulons that might have heard. But none did. Akio skittered to the inner wall. Again, he put his hands together and repeated a breathy, “Alchemy activate.” He placed his hands on the wall.

An opening formed in the obsidian barrier. Akio slid through and then used his alchemy power to close it behind him. The granite rear wall of the Hall of Death loomed

before him. A rope dropped down from somewhere above, causing him to jump back and pull his sword. Akifumi's face appeared over the edge of the roof, barely visible in the sickly moonlight. Nimbly, Akio climbed the rope and followed Akifumi to the center of the massive stone roof.

"The Chapel of Doom is right below us," Akifumi informed him. "The Princess is being held there. You have the Alchemy powerup. Where did you get it?"

"I found the Eye of Alchemy stone in the swamp."

Akifumi suggested, "Then you can use it to get us inside."

Nodding, Akio used his alchemy to transform the roof. It opened a gaping hole in itself and the material in the roof formed into a staircase that spiraled down into the Hall. Akio bounded down the stairs, closely followed by Akifumi.

"SSSSo!" hissed the Remulon Overlord as Akio reached the bottom. "The vile Captain Miyamoto Musashi issss not dead. And hissss every-annoying companion Yagyu Jubei issss here too, I ssssee. My minionssss have underesssstimated you, but I shall not! The Princesssss is mine and she will be sssssacrificed to the Vortex of Doom so that I may have all power in the Universssse! Not even the great Musssssashi can sssstop me now."

The Remulon Overload slithered toward the Princess, who was chained to a rough-hewn stone altar. It oozed thick yellow pus as it moved across the granite floor. Leaping twenty feet at a time, Akio covered the distance to the Princess while Akifumi attacked the Overload's squad of personal bodyguards. With swordwork so deft his movements were a blur, Akifumi dispatched the Overlord's minions. Akio pelted the chains holding the Princess with thundering blows, releasing her. He bent over her unconscious form and placed his hand against her throat. He had made it in time; she still had a pulse.

The Overload screeched, "You shall not have her!" It surged forward and spat poisonous pus at him. Dodging easily, Akio leapt toward the creature. Right in mid-air, everything froze except Akio and Akifumi.

"Akio and Akifumi," Naomi's voice echoed through the chamber. "Your parents have asked that you return home."

Akio landed in a heap, banging his shin. "*Itai!*" he yelped.

"Naomi!" Akifumi called out. "We're almost done with this level. We'll come when we're finished."

"Your parents have directed me to have you come now," Naomi replied. "Ending program."

Akio sat up in his artificial reality pod and looked toward the pod to his right. Akifumi was climbing out, so Akio did likewise.

"All that way!" Akifumi moaned. "We almost made it through the level. We were right at the boss."

Shaking his head regretfully, Akio replied, "We'd better go home. Father won't like it if we're late."

Reluctantly, Akifumi agreed. The pair exited the artificial reality suite and headed for home.

“Hey Unmodified! What are you doing here?”

Akio whirled around to see Rick striding down the wide corridor outside of school, waving. Surprised, Akio waited for him to catch up.

“What are you doing here?” Rick repeated as he drew near. He tugged at the neck of his crisp school uniform.

“What do you mean?” Akio asked. “I’ve been at this school for a year already.”

“Really? An elite school like this?” Rick jibed. “You didn’t impress me as the studious type.”

Shrugging, Akio replied, “I’m not really. I just did well on the tests, so they moved me up here from my old school down below the arcology’s waterline.”

“You must have done *really* well to get into a place like this,” Rick replied, eyeing him doubtfully. “I’m only here because my mom’s rich. Those are the only two ways to get in here—by being rich or smart.”

“Well, I’m not rich.”

“So you’re smart. Cool.”

“Uh, thanks. But it’s not like I get good grades. I don’t really like to study. I have some friends back home that are smarter. Harriet and Hugh. They got into a good school too.”

“You don’t mean Harriet Brightway and Hugh Benson?” asked Rick, awed.

“Yeah, that’s them.”

“They’re supposed to be the two smartest humans alive. I saw it on the 3V news.”

“Yeah,” Akio agreed. “I saw it too. Harriet sent me a video mail. They started school last week. Sounds like they’re doing good.”

Rick grinned slyly, “Is this Harriet your girlfriend?”

Shaking his head, Akio answered, “Nope, just a friend. She liked another guy; my best friend Jeff. He was lost in the wormhole collapse two years ago.”

“Wow. Sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks,” Akio said. “Hey, we’d better hurry. Class is going to start,” he urged. Together, they followed the flow of students into the school.

“What class are you in?” asked Akio.

Rick pulled his comPod from the pocket of his uniform and called up his schedule on its display. “It says 2-A,” he announced.

Incredulous, Akio queried, “Seriously?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Because that’s the class I’m in,” explained Akio.

“Cool.”

“Uh, yeah. Cool.”

They arrived at class just barely ahead of the bell. Akio quickly scooted to his desk as the students stood for the entrance of their teacher.

“*Ohayo gozaimasu*,” (Good morning) Arimori-*sensei* greeted them as he entered.

“*Ohayo gozaimasu*,” the class greeted in unison, bowing. They sat down.

Standing next to Rick, Arimori-*sensei* continued in Japanese. “I’d like to introduce a new member of our class, Zeniya Rikiya. He comes from the Canadian colony of

Whitehorse in the Yukon Cluster. I'll ask all of you to help him with his Japanese. *Yoroshiku.*"

The class dutifully responded, "*Yoroshiku onegai shimasu.*" (Please accept our best regards.)

"Rikiya, if you need anything, please ask our class president, Harada Eri." Tiny Eri stood and bowed. She sat down quickly.

"Please take the empty seat there behind Akio." Rick nodded and took his seat.

Arimori-*sensei* dove straight into his history lecture. Akio listened for as long as he could, and then, as usual, his mind started to wander. The other kids had already turned on their desks and called up the notes they took before the summer break. They each took out a plastic stylus and began writing on the top of the desk.

The desk, which had a computer built-in that was connected wirelessly to the school's network, was touch-sensitive on the top. When a student wrote on it, it tracked the movements of the stylus and displayed a line on its surface. It gave the appearance of writing with ink. The desk then converted the handwritten text into characters that looked like they were typed.

Looking around the class, Akio observed everyone else writing diligently. His mind seemed stuck in neutral.

'This is exactly what Father scolds me about,' he thought, trying to pull himself back into the here and now. But it was excruciating. Listening to the lecture was like watching a houseplant grow. It was just too slow for him.

Struggling to stay focused, Akio turned on his desk. Just to be different than usual, he decided to call up the textbook and read some of it. Rapidly scrolling through the pages, Akio finished the book before the bell rang signaling the end of the period. He breathed a sigh of relief as many of his classmates went out into the hall.

"How come you were flipping through the book like that?" Rick asked from behind him.

"What?"

"I saw you scrolling through the book really fast. It was weird."

Akio shrugged and explained, "I was just reading it. I thought I'd try something different. Maybe it will help my grades."

"No one reads *that* fast," objected Rick.

"Akio does," broke in Junji, who sat in the next row.

"Yeah, Akio does," agreed Kenji, who sat behind Junji.

Rick jerked his thumb in their direction and asked Akio, "Friends of yours?"

Nodding, Akio said, "Yeah. We surf together."

Junji added, "And we fight together."

Amused, Rick asked, "Fight? You guys fight?" They both nodded.

Akio explained, "Junji and I are in the karate club. Kenji and I are in the *kendo* club."

"I know what karate is," Rick said, "but what is *kendo*?"

"Sword fighting," Kenji replied. "Akio's the best."

"I still haven't beaten Goda," Akio objected.

"You will," Kenji assured him. To Rick, he said, "You've got to come to *kendo* and see Akio fight. You've never seen anything like it."

"I'm not much on joining clubs," Rick demurred, stretching his gangly legs into the aisle.

“You have to,” Akio told him. “It’s the rule. You have to join at least one school club. I’m in two.”

“You *have* to join a club?” Rick asked incredulously.

The other three nodded.

Unhappy, Rick muttered, “Fighting just isn’t my thing. Maybe there’s an engineering club or a robotics club I can join.”

“There’s both,” replied Akio. “In fact, the robotics club is working on an undersea explorer bot. It’s not that well built, though.”

“How do you know?”

“Before I came here, I had a friend that taught me a lot about robotics.”

“Is it that guy you mentioned before, Jeff? The one that’s dead?”

Akio snapped hotly, “He’s not dead! He’s missing. Some of the people are being found, you know.”

“Sorry.”

Akio calmed down. Just then, the bell rang for the next period as students took their seats. Arimori-*sensei* returned to the board at the front of the class and immediately began to lecture about the Japanese language.

The day dragged on, as school always did for Akio. But since reading the textbook had helped the last lecture make a lot more sense, Akio continued to read his textbooks all through the morning. He was surprised. They weren’t nearly as boring as he thought they would be.

Just before lunch, Akio had P.E. After changing into his P.E. clothes, he went with Rick, Junji, and Kenji to the tennis courts. Because there were more students than courts available, the four of them had to wait their turn to play. They sprawled themselves on the bleachers and chatted.

Across the cavernous room, they could see the girls’ P.E. classes practicing track and field events. Overhead, the bright lights on the high ceiling simulated natural sunshine. Rick complained to them about having to leave the Whitehorse Mining Colony. Junji and Kenji were both fluent in English, so they didn’t mind that Rick didn’t want to speak Japanese.

“It was a great place,” he bragged. “There’s 18 drifts in the colony. We lived in the Watson 5th Drift.”

“What’s a drift?” Junji asked.

Shaking his head, Kenji chided Junji, “Man, for someone as smart as you are, you sure don’t know much about the universe.”

Rick explained, “A drift is like a space station that floats out in interstellar space. Usually, they’re not designed. People just slap them together. The Whitehorse colony started with just one guy in a habitation module. Other people came along, so they just added more on. Gradually it grew into a huge complex. Then people started building other drifts nearby. The nice thing about a drift is that the people who live there give themselves plenty of room to live in. The Watson 5th Drift was as long as this arcology and only had 100,000 people in it. We had lots of space. My family is all water miners, like a lot of people in that star system. It was so great there. We were about six light days outside the King Edward system. That’s where the Watson Ice Cluster is. There are three habitable planets in the system. All of them are completely covered with snow and ice. Great skiing.”

Junji asked, “If it was so great, why did your family move here?”

Rick soured, "My parents decided it would be good for us to 'get in touch with our Japanese roots.' So my mom got a job with a conglomerate in this system. She's doing executive training here, and then in two years we go out to the Hokkaido System. She's going to run an ice mining operation out there."

"What about your dad?" Junji queried. "Does he work too?"

"Of course!" Rick replied, a bit ruffled. "But he's an ice miner. He runs ships that crush up ice asteroids and packs the ice into big blocks for shipping. So he's taking a couple of years off while Mom's in training. Then he's going to run an ice mining ship for the conglomerate."

A shadow fell over Akio. Turning around, he glanced upward, squinting because of the bright sunlamps overhead. To his surprise, Kasumi towered over him.

"*Kekkon shite kudasai*," (Marry me) she intoned bluntly.

Akio choked, "WHAT?"

"*O-yome ni shite kudasai*," (Make me your wife) she demanded in her usual detached monotone.

Akio was speechless. Kenji asked her in Japanese, "Why are you asking him to marry you?"

Kasumi stared at him stonily. Then she answered, also in Japanese, "Because he can read fast. Everyone knows it. And he's 100% Unmodified. That's rare. I have to ask now or someone else will take him."

"You want to marry him because he can *read fast*?"

She scratched her nose, and then let her arm flop limply to her side. "Reading is what I like best," she explained. Then to Akio she commanded in an almost listless voice, "Let's be engaged. I asked first, so I get to have you. You can call me Dear. I'll call you Darling. We can read together on our dates."

Horrified, Akio tried to speak, but his mouth seemed to be suddenly turned to stone. Luckily, he observed four other boys leaving a tennis court so he hastily managed to stammer, "I ... I think it's our turn to play tennis. We have to go, Kasumi. Uh ... see you at the feed store."

"Goodbye, Darling."

Flushed with embarrassment, Akio leaped off the bleachers in one giant bound and tore over to the now-empty court with his racket. He kept his back to Kasumi.

Rick, Junji, and Kenji joined him on the court.

"That was WEIRD!" Junji observed.

Kenji replied, "She's always been like that. I've been in the same school with her since kindergarten. She always reads. She doesn't talk to hardly anybody. The other girls don't really like her much. They make fun of her."

"I think she's amazing," Rick told them almost breathlessly, in English.

"WHAT?" exclaimed Junji and Kenji together.

"Everything about her is amazing," he asserted. "She's almost as tall as me and she's sleek and pretty. She just walked right up and asked him to marry her. That's so awesome! She didn't care what anybody thought. She just said what she wanted to and didn't worry about it."

Junji demanded, "Are we talking about the same girl? That wasn't awesome that was weird."

“Let’s play tennis,” Akio interrupted. He grabbed a ball from a bucket on the sidelines and said, “I’ll serve. Rick, why don’t you be my partner? Junji and Kenji, you two can play the other side.” He moved to the rear position on their half of the court.

“So are you going to marry her?” Rick wanted to know.

“NO!”

“Then do you mind if I make a try for her?”

Akio stood, dumfounded. At last he replied, “Sure. Go for it. Who knows, she might just change her mind and ask you to marry her.” He served the ball before Rick could continue the conversation.

Akio stood on a wide beach covered with red sand, his mind hazy. The light purple sky above him was dotted with fluffy lavender clouds that wafted above a purple sea. A mammoth red sun loomed over the horizon.

Along the shore ran a tangled jungle that was a smattering of every color imaginable. Akio noticed a gap in the forest, so he ambled blearily in that direction. He could see a path leading up from the beach that meandered to a large castle-like structure made of pale blue crystal. A girl stood at the head of the path holding hands with the young man next to her. Gradually, he realized he knew the girl. As his mind cleared, Akio greeted, "Madison?"

"Hello, Akio," she replied, "do you remember being here before?" She eyed him intently.

"Now that you mention it," Akio commented, "I do. You were here. And you said something about something dangerous." Akio touched his hand to his forehead. "You put something into my head," he continued. He held his hands before him, palms upward, and gazed at them in confusion. "And my hands," he finished.

"Yes, Akio. Very good," she encouraged. "You've actually been here multiple times. But I have to work very hard to establish a connection strong enough for you to remember this on a conscious level. Now at last we have made a good connection."

"Huh? Madison, what are you talking about?"

She continued, "Akio, please call me Eden now. I'm no longer the person that you once knew. And I have contacted you because you are all in very great danger. I need you to help me save the human race."

"Eden? You want to be called Eden?"

Eden reached out and patted his cheek. "Don't get too focused on that Akio," she instructed gently. "We'll talk about it more another time. For now I just want you to remember your gifts and use them. I can't maintain this link much longer. If you use the gifts I gave you, our connection will become stronger."

Akio shook his head. "Madison, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Call me Eden. And don't worry about it. Just focus on your gifts. You have great intelligence, which you are not using at all. You have an affinity with darkness, so you will be strongest when there is little or no light. You can see perfectly, even in the total absence of light. Darkness is your friend. Wrap it around yourself to hide and move stealthily. Darkness is also your weapon, Akio. You can forge the DarkSword. No one will be able to stand before you except Jeff, who will be your equal."

A haze crept into his vision as Eden called urgently, "The link is fading, Akio. Just remember to focus on your gifts. Remember ..."

Akio sat up in his bed and looked around his bedroom. "Wow," he said to no one. "That was a weird dream." He lay down and quickly fell back to sleep.

6

Gripping the hilt of his bamboo *shinai* sword tightly, Akio advanced warily on Goda. The sounds of bamboo thwacking against bamboo ricocheted through the gym as pairs of students battled together in practice matches.

As Akio drew closer to his opponent, Goda circled to the right, sliding his bare feet on the gymnasium floor. Goda shifted his upheld *shinai* slightly to the left. Akio glared at the stony-faced Goda through his *men*, his clear plastic helmet.

Suddenly, Goda flipped the direction of his *shinai*, swiftly lunged to the left, and jabbed at Akio's *do*, the superstrong plastic armor covering Akio's chest. But Akio wasn't there.

WHACK!

Goda stood frozen in place. The onlookers in the gym leaped to their feet and let out a collective cheer of amazement.

Standing behind Goda and facing away from him, Akio too was stunned. Realization flooded over him as the *kendo* match was called in his favor. Still not believing what had just happened, Akio turned around and bowed to Goda. As he walked toward the benches, Kenji came running to congratulate him.

"You ... you jumped over him!" he shouted to Akio. "I can't believe it! It was almost too fast to see. When did you learn to jump like that? That was great the way you hammered him on top of the head before he even realized you were above him. I've never seen anything like that."

Akio plopped onto a bench and pulled off his *kote* gauntlets that protected his hands.

"You finally beat Goda," Kenji congratulated. "I can't wait to tell Junji and Rick." After pounding Akio a few times on the back, Kenji trotted off to find the others.

The coach approached and said, "Akio that was fantastic. I knew you had it in you to become truly great at this sport. But I have to warn you, jumping over your opponent and hitting him from above is not allowed when we compete in tournaments with other schools."

"Yes *Sensei*," Akio agreed dazedly as he pulled off his *men*.

"I suppose," the coach continued, "that you learned that move in history class, didn't you."

"H ... history class?" stammered Akio, confused.

The coach nodded. "Of course. That's the classic move that Miyamoto Musashi used to win his famous duel with Sasaki Kojiro."

"Oh ... uh ... actually I just reacted," Akio explained. "I didn't think about it at all."

"I'm impressed, Akio. I think you really have what it takes to become a professional."

Akio started in surprise. "A professional?"

"Yes," the coach agreed. "But it will take a lot more work than you're giving it now. If you're interested, I can recommend a good teacher to take private lessons from."

"Th ... thank you *Sensei*," replied Akio hesitantly and bowing his head slightly.

Nodding, his coach urged him, "Think about it and let me know."

Akio rose and gathered his things. "Yes *Sensei*." He bowed, and then headed for home. As he exited the gates of the school Akio felt a surge of pride at his *Sensei*'s praise.

"DARLING!"

Akio yelled as someone leaped in front of him, causing them both to collide and tumble over each other to the floor. His *kendo* equipment clattered down around them.

“*Itai!*” Akio moaned, rubbing the sore spot where he had banged his head. To his horror, he found Kasumi sprawled on top of him. His *kendo* equipment was scattered everywhere and a crowd of students was staring at them.

“*Gomen,*” (Sorry) Kasumi apologized as she quickly got up. “I made you *onigiri.*” She held out an open food container. Except for a few grains of rice, it was empty. Akio looked down at himself to see that he was covered with rice and dried seaweed.

Many of the students nearby twittered with laughter. “Is that his girlfriend?” he heard a girl ask.

Kasumi flushed a bright red. She looked as if she might cry. A piece of dried seaweed fell from Akio’s face as he scrambled to his feet.

Akio stammered, “Uh ... well ... thanks for the thought Kasumi. I ... uh ... appreciate it but ... ” Desperately searching for something to say that would get him out of the situation, Akio finally blurted out, “I have to go. My father has work for me to do. Bye.” He hastily scooped up his *kendo* equipment and scurried away.

Quickly catching a passing hovertram, Akio brushed off grains of rice as he sat down in a seat far from anyone else. After several stops, he got off and rode an elevator down to his floor. As Akio approached his flat, the front door slid itself open. He kicked off his shoes, scattering them randomly, and was headed down the hall to his room when heard his mother’s voice say, “*Hora!*” (Hold it!).

Akio stopped dead. In a calmer voice, his mother called, “Please don’t scatter your shoes in the *genkan* like that. Put them nicely in the cabinet.”

Heaving a sigh, Akio dropped his *kendo* equipment, went back to the *genkan*, and put his shoes away in the cabinet along the *genkan*’s wall. He scooped up his equipment and went to his room. After showering and putting on fresh clothes, Akio plopped himself on his bed. Akifumi entered.

“I hear you’re engaged,” Akifumi teased.

“You hear wrong,” muttered Akio as he covered his face with his pillow.

Akifumi sneered, but let it drop. Instead he said, “Mom and Dad want to talk to you.”

“No they don’t.”

“Yes, they do.”

“No they don’t.”

“Akio, why are you saying that?”

“Because I want it to be true.”

“That doesn’t make it true.”

“But I still *want* it to be true.”

“Akio! Mom and Dad want to talk to you!”

Groaning, Akio heaved himself off his bed and plodded down the hall to the main living area of the flat. His father sat on the carpeted floor reading the news on a vishee, a video sheet, which was a paper-thin computer about eleven inches tall by nine inches wide. As Akio entered, his father indicated that he should sit next to him. Warily Akio sat down. His mother came, gracefully settled herself on the other side of his father, and folded her hands into her lap. She gazed at Akio proudly.

“Akio,” his father began, “we talked the other day about you being sixteen now.”

A cold knot formed in Akio’s stomach. “What about it?” he asked guardedly.

“A family here in the arcology has contacted us about you,” his father explained.

Akio's eyes grew wide in horror. "M ... me?"

Nodding, his father told him, "Don't worry. This is just a first meeting. They want you to consider dating their daughter. She turned sixteen recently as well. That's all this is. Just a meeting and maybe some dates. After that, you need do nothing until you're at least 18."

Frozen, Akio couldn't respond. His mother glared at him intently and commanded, "Breathe!"

Akio gasped for air. Without thinking, he blurted out in English, "I ... I can't! You can't! We can't! I ... I ..."

"Breathe!" Akio's mother commanded again.

Akio heaved a deep breath and fell silent.

His father, replying in Japanese, tried to reassure him. "This is not something you should worry about. All that's happening is that you're meeting a girl. We won't make you go on any dates if you don't want to. You must meet the girl to be polite. After that, you decide."

"Wh ... why do I have to meet her now? Can't I meet her when I'm older? Like 20 maybe, or 30? Or 100?"

Patently, his father explained, "The girl you are meeting is from a very prominent family here in the arcology. The girl's father is the head of the company that buys most of our fish. It is an honor for him to want his daughter to meet you."

"Is that why you're doing this?" Akio demanded. "Because you're afraid that if you don't play along they'll ruin our fish sales?"

"Of course not, Akio," his father retorted, clearly disappointed. "I am just trying to emphasize how important this meeting is. It's an opportunity for you. But your mother and I will not force anything on you. We want you to choose your own way in life. But we must at least be polite enough to meet with the girl's family."

"I ... don't want to."

Akifumi, who had entered the room silently, suddenly demanded, "Why not? She might be really good looking, a real *bijin*." To their parents Akifumi offered, "I'll meet her. I'm Unmodified too, you know."

Chuckling, their father told him, "You're only twelve. No sixteen-year-old girl is interested in a twelve-year-old boy. And did you do your homework?"

Deflated, Akifumi slouched off to his room.

Akio's father declared with finality, "The meeting will take place Saturday at 5 p.m. You will wear your formal kimono. Remember, Akio, Saturday at 5 p.m. That's the day after tomorrow. Don't forget and don't be late. Naomi will remind you. Now please go do your homework as well. Dinner will be ready soon."

Seeing that there was no point in arguing, Akio returned to his room and collapsed on his bed.