

The Level Playing Field

Prologue

Tokyo

Friday, April 3

Sachi Yoshida had spent most of his spare time over the past three months in the same irksome position: balanced precariously on a rickety stool, earphones pressed hotly against his ears. At twenty nine, the short, intense, electronics technician wondered why he had undertaken this foolish spy-hunt. Trying to relieve the knots in his belly, Sachi planted his heels on the highest rung, drawing his knees into his chest. Not only was his gut protesting, his nerves were frayed. He was ready to quit. He'd made a mistake, that's all. Gotten suspicious over nothing.

Suddenly the tape began to turn, rubbing the side of the warped take-up reel of the 32 track tape recorder, emitting an eerie squeal at each rotation. Over the rasp of his own breath, Sachi listened intently to the disembodied voices. His eyes closed in disbelief.

After several minutes in a haze of fear, Sachi allowed himself to absorb what he had heard. The distant microphones had just confirmed his worst suspicion. A secret society, a *shakai*, was conducting economic war; and the first battle was over. America had been transformed from the world's strongest economy to the world's largest debtor nation. The Americans didn't even know how, but then, nor did most Japanese. Only a select few knew of this secret society that so completely controlled Japanese life. The small basement storage room in which Sachi hunched, was layered in filth and dust: soot from an inefficient coal furnace, filmed over by the residue of an oil burning replacement. Sachi had rented the storage closet in the old apartment house from the building's superintendent, whom he suspected of pocketing the money he paid. Sachi didn't like cheating the landlord, but the room had been the only available location within range of the transmitters he'd placed outside the Bonsai Club. The superintendent had moved his mops and pails to another room down the hall, leaving a battered but sturdy steel table and pre-war stool with a bent leg and broken caster. Suspended through overhead pipes, a single unshaded lightbulb cast deep gray shadows over Sachi's crudely stacked switching and recording equipment.

Sachi stared at the large slow turning reels before focusing on the small LEDs that indicated signals were being received from seven of the twenty-four rooms under surveillance.

Cold drops of perspiration drenched Sachi's shirt as the overheard conversation continued, revealing how this secret *shakai* had manipulated Japanese society for

centuries. Known by its members as *Kani*, they controlled the invisible strings that preserved Japan's homogeneous nature. His mouth grew dry as he realized Japan's heritage had not been accidental. It had evolved carefully, by design.

Sachi's high tech surveillance continued to record the history of the Kani whose symbol was its literal translation, the crab. His hand shaking, Sachi flipped a switch. His headset now picked up a corridor outside the interrogation rooms.

"Greetings, Mr. Prime Minister," a voice said.

"I resigned two years ago, my dear friend. The honor is no longer mine."

"Regardless, your trade penetration into the American market has done Japan a great service."

"You exaggerate, Mr. Ling," the ex-prime minister replied modestly.

"Not at all. You'll be an inspiration when the students, the *kohai*, are finally permitted to see. They will understand our power and blind commitment will follow."

"An exciting time for everyone," the ex-prime minister agreed. "The Kani needs these young kohai."

"Yes. Several will make excellent warriors, while others have expertise in manufacturing, trade, banking and economics. They'll guarantee our trade superiority."

"A diverse group indeed," the ex-prime minister's voice echoed through Sachi's earphones. "I've just returned from Mr. Nozaki's room. He surmised the two kohai died in the mountains because they violated secrecy. He challenged me with the question. His mask kept him from seeing my surprise, but he probably hoped the sound of my voice would give him the truth. His ploy was so transparent, I laughed. He volunteered that he had not broken the pledge, but admitted to having overheard the two whisper on forbidden matters. He concluded the two kohai had violated their sacred trust and their death had been the expected result."

Sachi felt his nape tingle; a tremor ran down his spine as they confirmed how far the Kani would go to protect their secrets. He couldn't afford a mistake now, but had he already made one? The telephone call he had made to his uncle two nights earlier came back into his thoughts, haunting him. Since that call he twice imagined being followed. Was it the Kani, the Crab? Had he been discovered?

"Mr. Nozaki is perceptive; he will make a great warrior," Ling continued. "I have just come from Mr. Satoshi's room. He has not yet put it together."

"Ha. Our *kohai*, students, have much to learn from our *sempai*, teachers, and several of them are even now in the command room writing a new script for them. Mr. Satoshi will learn of this cautionary lesson soon enough. I was about to visit Mr. Morita. Do you wish to join me?"

"Yes," Ling replied, adding, "Have you heard there are two more *kohai* suspected of placing the Kani at risk?"

The conversation paused and Sachi wiped moisture from his brow, instinctively rubbing his wet palm across a pant leg. "I have. Just before leaving the mountain last Sunday," came the muted reply.

Sachi strained to hear the voices as the men moved off. He flipped the switch to the interrogation room where he knew he would find the *kohai* known as Morita. A moment later he heard two men enter the room. "Mr. Morita, you may sit down," Ling said. "Are you comfortable? Is your mask keeping you in darkness?"

"Yes, most honorable *sempai*. The mask may keep out the light, but it heightens my ability to understand your teachings."

"Are you saying our teachings are so obtuse that you need to be shielded from distraction in order to understand them?" the ex-prime minister bristled, his voice rising.

"No, most honorable *sempai*. I am sorry to have offended. Your presentations are most intellectual. What I meant to say is that with my eyes blinded, I'm more sensitive to subtle changes in tone or manner. Being so helps me appreciate the concepts you and the other *sempai* choose to discuss. It helps me focus less on my own point of view and become more amenable to yours."

"If you are telling me what you think I wish to hear, then I'm wasting my time." Sachi heard Morita's response cut short, "Are you a parrot? What about your own point of view?" the ex-prime minister asked, frustration clear in his voice.

"I have again offended, I am sorry. I only meant ..."

"I know what you meant," the voice interrupted condescendingly. "It sounds as if you have forgotten how to think." Sachi flinched at the sudden, uncharacteristically loud avowal: "I've had enough."

Sachi heard footsteps, a door open then slam shut. Silence followed, but Sachi was sure only one person had left the room. Finally he heard a sigh and he knew Morita wasn't alone. The silence continued.

Sachi pressed the off button and removed the reel. He lifted the oversized replacement from the table, and began threading the tape through the heads and drive capstan. But in the storeroom's silence, Sachi could not get those imperious voices out of his head. He had listened to many of the weekly teachings of these masked new-ones over the

last three months. Now he understood. They were being groomed to wield power, to control commerce. Their minds were being programmed to be Kani, and they had pledged to die for its secrets. Sachi believed them.

Sachi turned-on the recorder and the take-up reel resumed its quiet but rhythmic squeal. For probably the hundredth time he wondered if it could be heard outside the door; certainly a suspicious sound to be coming from a closet. Probably not, he reassured himself. He picked up a large brown envelope and rammed the tape into the plastic bubble wrap. He was nervous about mailing the tape this way; in a hurry, he hadn't disguised the voices like he had done in the past. But he had to take the chance.

Without knowing why, Sachi's mind went back to his childhood as he wrote the Toronto address on the envelope. Like all Japanese children Sachi had learned early to accept the ways of his father and his father's father. Then near his sixth birthday, Hiro Tansing, a simple shop keeper had befriended him. Sachi's father had taught him the ways of Japanese life, but it was through Mr. Tansing that the examples had made its strongest impact.

Sachi's relationship with the shopkeeper had begun when he had accidentally knocked a porcelain jar of candy off the shop counter. He had tried to run, but Mr. Tansing had caught him and sat him down for a long talk. From the beginning he had shown kindness and a patience that Sachi had only known from his parents and grandparents. His family had watched with interest as respect and trust developed in this new relationship. Finally, his father had told him that Mr. Tansing could be his *sempai*, his teacher and mentor. Sachi would be the *kohai*, the student.

"My son," his father had said, "some questions a father can answer and the son will accept; but other answers the son may refuse to listen to. The son will need to ask those questions again and it is best to receive this wisdom from another; one whom he also respects. The sempai fulfills that function, as he fosters the relationship with the same loving care as a parent."

"We are part of a team," Mr. Tansing had said, "and it is expected that we will achieve our goals together. If you share success, you carry respect because your efforts have elevated others. If you achieve many successes, you will be noticed; perhaps quietly, but humility is equally important. How you share your achievements will be measured.

"Managers of industry and government are unwavering in their commitment to our way of life. Full employment, a long career, and a company sponsored retirement is of primary importance. To achieve these objectives a job must provide worker satisfaction and anything dysfunctional must and will be eliminated."

There, in his broom closet, Sachi suddenly realized that the sempai relationship he cherished and so common to the Japanese culture, had had its origin in the ancient *shakai* he was even now monitoring. He felt another chill run down his spine.

The pain in Sachi's stomach stabbed again, reminding him of the medicine he had left at home. He'd buy more on the way home, but first he must write a note to his cousin, Tori Tahashi. A discreet note. He hoped Tori could read between the lines.

Sachi pulled the pen from his shirt pocket and began writing on the small pad of yellow paper he kept on the table.

My dear cousin, Tori,

My night school classes are stimulating. We have begun to cover foreign trade issues, particularly with America. As the old Japanese expression goes, business is war. I see much truth in that.

The news of your coming to Japan this summer is wonderful. I look forward to seeing you again and talking about my studies. I called my uncle in Nagoya a few days ago to discuss what I have been learning. He's a senior manager at the Nagoya Steel Company, and I hoped he would be able to offer some insight. I didn't even have time to mention my source of information before the conversation turned cold ...very fast. He didn't wish to discuss my studies. He also suggested I forget this area of learning and stop taking notes.

Perhaps, he's too busy at work to take interest.

I was followed by two men near my home today. I gave them the slip near the subway entrance by my home. Probably another street gang.

I hope everything is well with you. Regards, Sachi.

Sachi slipped the note into the envelope beside the tape and sealed the package. Before leaving he scanned the equipment one last time. The tape was turning slowly; it could record all weekend using less than one quarter of the tape. Wasn't technology wonderful? he mused grimly.

He walked to the door with a slight limp, rubbing his legs to get his circulation moving again.

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Once outdoors he glanced up and down the street, Tozimoto dori, spotting a nearby postal box. With a sigh of relief he quickly slipped the envelope down the mail slot. Ignoring his stomach, Sachi continued past a pharmacy to the brightly lit entrance of the Akasaka Mitsuke subway station. Rushing down the stairs, Sachi dropped a token into the slot and pushed through the automated turnstile. He didn't have long to wait before the screeching of powerful brakes on steel brought the southbound train to a heaving halt before him. Once inside, the rocking motion began to soothe his nerves, allowing him to drift into a practiced meditation. The pain in his stomach slowly eased.

A sudden braking rocked Sachi forward in his seat. It was his station. Standing quickly, he grabbed the handle suspended from the ceiling. The doors clanged open. He merged with the disembarking passengers fighting their way through the crowd already pushing into the subway car. Several feet down the platform, Sachi looked up in surprise to see three men intentionally blocking his way.

Sachi felt fear and his mind raced as he moved toward the side of the platform. The three men moved in unison to cut him off. Before he could react further the man on his left grabbed his left arm, while another clutched his right. The leader stood before him as the others held him fast. "Mr. Yoshida. My name is Mr. Yakata. Come with us. We wish to talk with you." His voice was just loud enough to be heard above the noise on the platform. Yakata grabbed Sachi's right hand, placing his thumb and index finger over the web between Sachi's thumb and forefinger and squeezed.

The pain was excruciating, giving Sachi the urge to vomit. As his knees buckled, Yakata reduced the pressure. "You will come with us. Without resistance."

The Kani, they had him, and Sachi knew they would not let him go. He had to get away. But how?

Sachi had little knowledge of the martial arts, and even less in its application. He prayed that luck would attend his moves. The cruel grip on his hand had forced him into a partial crouch, but as the pressure was eased he rose on his left leg. Keeping his right knee raised in a motion that at first looked like a reaction to pain, he suddenly drove his right foot into Yakata's leg just above the knee. He twisted his right arm free and drove a fist into the temple of the man to his left. His knuckles rapped painfully on bone and the man backed off. Sachi leaped back, nimbly, just as the third man tried to grab him.

The stairs ahead were blocked by people descending to the platform, so he dashed toward the other side and worked his way into a sea of people.

He zig-zagged through the crowd and near the edge of the platform he darted behind the yellow warning line to clear another cluster of waiting commuters. He then spotted the stairwell at the platform's far end. The stairs were clear as he raced through the thinning crowd. Elation suffused him. He was going to make it! Only a few more yards and he could move from the platform's edge. The stairs were just beyond.

Maneuvering around the last waiting passenger, Sachi angled toward the steps. He momentarily stumbled as he was struck from the side. Yakata. He must have run down the center of the platform. Sachi tried to run faster, thrashing in his effort to throw Yakata's tight grip off his left forearm.

Sachi heard another train coming down the tunnel from the other direction. Attempting to defeat Yakata's iron clasp, he stopped and reached to grab his attacker's arm. If he was lucky he would throw his attacker onto the tracks and the train would do the rest.

Yakata's readiness, confirmed by the mastery of his punishing clinch anticipated Sachi's maneuver as he dropped his body lower, slamming himself into Sachi.

Sachi was not thrown far, but he had lost his footing. He hit the platform beyond the yellow caution line and grabbing desperately at the rim of the concrete, he rolled over the edge into the path of the oncoming train.

Sachi's last thought was of kindly Mr. Tansing, his *sempai*, and the scent of cherry blossoms in the village where he had spent his childhood summers.

- Chapter 1 -

Fort Myers, Florida
Wednesday, April 22

Scott Maxwell's desk was bare, except for a draft of the speech he was to deliver to the Economics Department at the University of Toronto. He glanced up as Doris, his secretary, shoved her head in the door shortly before eight o'clock. "Coffee will be ready in a minute," she announced, feigning surprise at his early arrival. She was gone before he could reply.

Scott was absorbed in a paragraph of his upcoming speech when Doris skipped into the room a few minutes later, balancing a small white china cup on a matching saucer. Without slowing she slid the coffee onto the large oak desk in one fluid motion. Once again he wondered how she managed not to spill it. Doris was not graceful as her short compact frame always moved at high speed, bouncing hard at each step. Green eyes in a petite face framed by brown hair and unadorned by makeup, she was alight with intelligence. Burdened with a professional formality, she always addressed Scott as Mr. Maxwell. "What's on my calendar? I'd like to get out of here early."

"Doorways Corporation board meeting at ten, which will take you through lunch. Portfolio review with Mrs. Feiffer at two, after that you're free."

"I'll bet you planned it that way," he said appreciatively.

"I'll have your mail sorted in a few minutes," she replied ignoring him with a smile and turning on her heel so quickly her pleated skirt swirled.

Scott carried the speech notes to his favorite chair in the far corner of the spacious office. A white leather couch, recliner and two easy chairs surrounded a glass coffee table, created a comfortable informal space set apart from his work area by an expanse of white Berber carpet.

Reaching for the phone on the corner table, Scott dialed a number he hadn't called in months.

"Business Management, Incorporated," answered a voice with a hint of a clipped accent.

"Bruce Hadden, please. Scott Maxwell calling."

"One moment, sir."

Scott thought of the many times his path and Bruce's had crossed. They'd both lived in Toronto when Scott was Chief Financial Officer of NorthStar Publishing, Canada's most prestigious publishing firm; Bruce had served on its board. Later, Bruce managed trade negotiations for a large international conglomerate, primarily involved in the European and Far Eastern markets. Scott had moved to Florida about ten years earlier, but through their common interest, business, they had stayed in contact.

"Hi, Scott. How you doing?" Bruce's voice boomed.

"Five pounds heavier and six months older," Scott chuckled. "I haven't lost my winter weight yet. I'll be in Toronto tomorrow afternoon giving a speech to the U of T's Economics Department."

"That's a far stretch from your business of stocks and bonds."

"True, but I've developed an economic trade formula that should put us on par with Japan. My old professor liked it and he asked me to present it to the student body."

"And you couldn't resist ...you're still a ham," Bruce chuckled.

"This is serious," Scott pressed seriously. "I predict Japan will open its markets, and soon."

"Sounds impossible. What can I do?"

"Have you noticed anything unusual in your trade with Japan?"

"What do you mean?" Bruce asked, his voice sharpening with interest.

"Like having payments directed to another company, or a foreign division of the same company? Anything that might cause you to suspect they were shifting revenues or hiding costs."

After a long pause Bruce replied thoughtfully, "No. But only a small part of our trade is with Japan."

"You see everything as normal?" Scott asked.

"There are too many barriers; I've been more successful in other Asian countries."

"Maybe you'll think of something," Scott suggested. "How about breakfast this Friday?"

"Sorry." Bruce's disappointment came over the phone. "I'll be out of town. Wait a minute. I just thought of something. Have you talked to Neil Porter yet?"

"I'll be seeing him tomorrow after my speech. Why?"

"Three weeks ago, I met him for a couple of pints at Churchill's Pub - you remember, that place off Yonge Street. He'd been in Tokyo filming a commercial. Neil doesn't know squat about trade, but he's got a great story to tell."

Scott's curiosity was piqued. Now he had another reason to look forward to seeing Neil, beyond their long friendship. Neil and he had known each other since adolescence and each had a summer cottage in the Muskoka lakes area north of Toronto. Their young families looked forward to their summers together.

He had barely replaced the phone in its cradle when the intercom cut in. "Mr. Maxwell. Your tickets to Toronto have arrived, and the Governor called."

Scott glanced at the framed letter of appreciation hanging on the wall. John Billings, Florida's governor, had presented it to him soon after his election. At the outset of Billings' campaign, Scott had approached him with a plan to streamline the Florida court system. The promise of viable legal reform had soon become the foundation of Billings' election platform; increased revenues with less demand on the courts for minor infractions had created the strongest voter turnout in recent state history. Not unnaturally, a strong bond had developed between the two forward looking men.

"He liked your trade formula," Doris continued. "He said the Secretary of Commerce in D.C. is scheduled to be out of town for three weeks, so he made a tentative appointment for you to see an Edward Levens next Thursday afternoon. Apparently, Mr. Levens has almost thirty years with the department and can tell you more about trade than anyone."

"Confirm the appointment," Scott replied, preoccupied with his notes.

Minutes later, Doris entered the office carrying a file. "Mail is distributed. Nothing urgent," she announced. "Where do you want the Feiffer file?"

Scott drained his coffee as he held out his hand.

"Sam completed the Feiffer charts. He says they look good. No surprises."

"Thanks." Scott said opening the file.

"Half hour till the board meeting," she reminded as she exited the room.

For all his wide ranging interests and affinity for broad theoretical planning, Scott was happiest working with clients, identifying financial needs and building portfolios around them. The trade-off between risk and return, the process of constantly monitoring performance was never boring. Client reviews were particularly satisfying when good performance was achieved, but Scott wasn't looking forward to this review. Mrs. Feiffer's late husband had been an astute investor, but she didn't even try to understand. Moreover, Mrs. Feiffer had a piercing high pitched voice that drove people to the edge. She was one account he could do without, but he felt he owed it to her husband's memory.

At least it would be an easy review, as he had once again outperformed the indices in both the income and growth components of her portfolio. Too bad she'd never understand what any of that meant.

Back at his desk, Scott scanned the stock quotes on his monitor, while pressing a button on the remote control. A television recessed in a bookshelf along the side wall, came alive with a utility analyst's rosy outlook.

A few minutes before 10:00, he closed the file and walked across the lobby to the boardroom. He was already thinking beyond Mrs. Feiffer's appointment, looking forward to an early dinner at the Naples, Ritz-Carlton with his wife, Kate. It was not often they slipped away from their two children, Brooke, age nine, and Andrew age seven. Scott entered the boardroom with a spring to his step. Kate might be a scientist and a college professor wrapped up in one academically impressive bundle; but Scott loved the woman underneath the lab coat: alluring, fun-loving with a sparkle in her eye. He'd have a room key in his pocket waiting for the right moment; she loved a romantic escapade.

- Chapter 2 -

Toronto, Ontario

Thursday, April 23

Scott leaned back in the cab, pleased with the response from students and faculty at the U of T's Economics Department. Their questions showed a clear understanding of the issues and within fifteen minutes they had challenged every aspect of the formula.

Scott shifted his attention to the Pakistani driver as he jerked the wheel, sending the cab across three lanes of traffic. Tires squealing on smooth streetcar tracks, the cab accelerated southbound on University Avenue through the Adelaide Street intersection. The late afternoon traffic remained heavy past King Street, thinning slightly as the cab

picked up speed down the hill toward Lake Ontario. Making a hard left on the lower level of the Queen Elizabeth Way, the driver stepped hard on the gas, aiming the taxi up the ramp. As they merged with the fast upper level traffic Scott could see Toronto Island and the harbor through gaps between the condominiums and shops that dotted the shoreline. The world's tallest unsupported structure, the CN Tower, stood guard over the Harbour Castle Hilton at the foot of Yonge Street where he was registered for the night.

Scott watched the ferry leave one of the slips in front of the luxurious hotel for the trip to Toronto Island less than a mile away. The driver spat an obscenity in his native tongue as he cut-off a car to reach the Church Street ramp. At street level the cab turned right on Cherry Street and several intersections later, one more right turn put the cab on Polson, a short dead end street of low warehouses converted to commercial offices. Neil's office/studio was at the end of the street, next to the harbor's edge.

The receptionist looked up pleasantly from her typewriter without showing the slightest hint of annoyance at Scott's interruption. The company's logo *Creative Concepts*, stood out from the wall in bright green.

"Scott Maxwell to see Mr. Porter."

"He's expecting you," she smiled, as she reached for the telephone.

The reception area offered an excellent view across the administrative office and graphic design studio through distorted antique glass panes set in French frames. The studio's exterior west wall and much of the north and south walls, were also glass, reaching to the fifteen foot ceilings, giving an unrestricted view of the harbor barely twenty feet beyond. Steel rafters, support beams, air handling ducts and electrical conduit were painted stark white, with splashes of color provided by hanging lights, shelving and divider panels. Bright enamels in red, yellow, blue and green, distinguished each work area without diminishing the wide open space. Impressive, Scott thought as the afternoon sun danced off the water in the harbor, washing the studio in a natural light far brighter than that of the hanging lights.

A heavy oversized door at the back of the studio opened with a bang. Scott turned toward the noise and saw Neil's broad grin spreading as he waved him over. At six feet one Neil looked like a linebacker, his broad muscular frame sufficient testimony that he still worked out. Neil's light brown hair at forty-five, showed no hint of the silvering that Scott's dark hair was beginning to show at the temples, even though the two were the same age.

"This studio is awesome - so bright, it's dazzling!" Scott extended his hand in a greeting that Neil ignored, grabbing Scott instead in a powerful bear hug. "How ya doin, you old piece of dog shit," he said warmly, slowly releasing his arms.

"I've just delivered a speech to a bunch of academics. I'm ready to unwind."

"That's easy. This is Toronto, remember? But first, let me show you the studio." Neil led Scott through the opening into darkness. It took a moment for Scott's eyes to adjust.

"What is this place?" he asked, trying to penetrate the gloom. Painted in dark tones the room was about the size of a school gymnasium.

"Our film studio," Neil responded proudly. "We do most of our photography here. There's a garage and loading dock back there," he said, pointing into the darkness. As they moved Scott noticed a row of portable room dividers to his right, his eyes slowly adjusting. "This is what we're working on," Neil said, leading Scott through a small opening.

"What is it?" Scott asked as he scanned the strange setup. Powerful lights perched on adjustable tripods illuminated a long narrow table with four inch sides. Almost thirty feet long and six feet wide, it was completely covered in black vinyl.

"It'll be an award winning photograph," Neil announced with obvious pride. "The advertising agency sold their client a marketing concept for their new perfume, Black Wave. They promised a large black wave as background for the perfume, but they couldn't deliver the image."

"How does it work?"

"A fraction of an inch of water sits on top of the vinyl, providing depth while reflecting like a black mirror. Underneath, mechanical rollers travel down the table making perfect waves in a black sea that's as smooth as glass. We shoot the print, enlarge the photograph and superimpose the perfume bottle."

"That's incredible," Scott exclaimed.

"We saved them a shit load of money," Neil said briskly as he moved toward the door. "Let's go upstairs to my office."

Scott followed Neil into the brightly lit studio and up a spiral staircase to a mezzanine over the reception area, about twenty feet wide and the length of the building. Steel handrails covered in glossy royal blue enamel framed the stairwell and mezzanine; low dividers achieved a balance of privacy and openness for the boardroom and executive offices.

Overlooking the studio below, Neil grabbed two Cokes from a small refrigerator under his desk and popped the caps from the short bottles. He shoved one across to Scott. "You're in town only for tonight?"

"Only one night, my friend," Scott confirmed. "But we'll be at the cottage for the summer."

Neil raised his Coke. "Your health," he grinned, taking a long swig.

"To the best sailor I know," Scott hoisted his bottle. The pleasure of nostalgia tugged at him, but the curiosity that had nagged since yesterday, kept his focus. Half reluctantly, half eagerly he said: "I talked to Bruce Hadden the other day. He told me to ask about your Tokyo trip."

"Yeah," Neil frowned. "Tokyo was a real experience. Which part do you want to hear?"

"I'm interested in how the Japanese might control foreign trade."

"Bottom line, they do" Neil said bluntly. "Six months ago I went to Tokyo with Tori Tahashi, my best film director to shoot a commercial for Isuzu. A couple of months later we were invited back for an exhibition of the commercial arts, sponsored by the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo.

"Tori's a Canadian of Japanese descent, and wanted to research his family tree. He found an aunt, uncle and a cousin living near Tokyo. His cousin, Sachi Yoshida, was near the same age, and had worked for Sony in product development. Apparently, his boss..."

"Was? Did you say was?" Scott asked.

"He died mysteriously a couple of weeks ago. It hit Tori pretty hard."

"'Mysteriously'?" Scott raised his eyebrows.

Neil nodded. "Sachi told us his boss had assigned him to install hidden surveillance devices at an exclusive men's club, the Bonsai Club in Tokyo. They told him the listening devices were needed for a study in adult learning. He needed to know more: ambient noise levels, seating arrangements, number of people, etcetera, but the club manager appeared purposely vague in his answers.

"Sachi was to replace older style devices in twenty or so rooms measuring ten feet square, plus several larger rooms in the basement and the main floor. Everything was wired to a large communications room in the basement. Sachi was warned not to enter

several rooms, but he did anyway. One was a large sitting room with two doors leading elsewhere. There were many antique Japanese figurines and paintings that looked like crabs or scorpions. There was something he couldn't put his finger on, he said, but he was intrigued. The mystery was too great for him, so he installed duplicate listening devices, directing their output to a nearby building where he could monitor them."

"What then?"

"The first night after Sachi set up his equipment, he drove by the Bonsai Club and noticed three or four stretch limousines entering the circular driveway. He counted twenty young men wearing suits and white faceless masks emerge from the limos, each one being escorted by a well-dressed older man. The young men's hands were not tied; apparently there of their own free will.

"Sachi told us these young men were called the *kohai*, students, being trained to take part in a secret *shakai*, which is some group that is part of a larger more secretive society, called the Kani. From his spying, he learned that this secret society began sometime around the twelfth century and they still continue to influence Japan's government today."

Sudden movement against the harbor's bright reflection drew Scott's attention. He squinted, as a field of sailboats raced toward the seawall. The lead boat turned and suddenly fourteen more Lasers tacked as if on cue.

"Some of the story smacks of half-baked Eastern mysticism to me," Neil continued. "But the basic fact, the existence of a radical group is obvious. They're teaching the new-ones, the *kohai*, how the Kani manipulate Japanese culture while remaining invisible to outsiders. They enlighten how, even today, they nurture man's role in the family and community.

"The Kani explain how they are the Empire's guiding hand, the force behind all Japanese business."

"Are you sure?" Scott questioned excitedly. "Was it as clear as that ...that their purpose was to control business?"

"I'm sure. Sachi told us how the *sempai*, the teachers, quizzed the *kohai*. Topics were varied, but the theme was the same: economic trade. Their examples were drawn from the United States and they talked as if they controlled all trade."

"Do you think they really have such power?" Scott asked slowly, stunned.

"I believe so. The *kohai* are there voluntarily. I doubt they'd remain masked through this ordeal if they weren't deadly serious." Neil paused, then went on soberly.

"Tori has kept the tapes and transcripts hidden, especially since his uncle told him that Sachi had been killed in a subway accident. He received another tape last week, which must have been mailed just before Sachi's death. Tori doesn't know what to do; he's nervous, and afraid to tell anybody for fear he'll be killed too."

"I can appreciate that. Japan's trade surplus is nearly one billion U.S. dollars per week. I'd think they'd go to any length to protect that cash flow." Scott hesitated. "Is Tori here?"

"He's doing a location shoot. Maybe he can meet us at Bigliardi's."

"Good idea. Is the rack of lamb still their specialty?"

"Still the best," Neil promised, picking up the phone.

- Chapter 3 -

"I like the new car," Scott exclaimed as he slid into the passenger seat of Neil's forest green Jaguar. The pleasant smell of rich leather filled his nostrils as the powerful engine hummed to life. Scott admired the ease with which Neil negotiated turns, maneuvering the car around slower city traffic. Neil's face plainly revealed how much he enjoyed the car. Absorbed by the ride, Scott barely noticed the Jag pull to the curb in front of the restaurant.

George Bigliardi's bistro had not changed much in the ten years since Scott's last visit. The lighting level was low, fading the gaudy wallpaper almost to tastefulness. The odor of stale smoke lingered. It was only five; the dinner crush hadn't begun.

George recognized Neil and rushed forward to take over from the maitre d'. "Good evening, Mr. Porter. Just the two of you this evening?" A short, heavy-set man in his fifties, Bigliardi's oily skin attested to his indulgence of garlic and olive oil, which also made his kitchen so fragrant.

"There'll be three tonight, but we'll have drinks first. We'd like a quiet table."

"Of course. You may have the table at the end of the balcony. You won't be bothered by waiters or the noise below."

Neil ordered a double rum and Coke with a twist of lime. Scott smiled, reminded again of their sailing days. Scott rarely drank; an occasional lite beer or a martini when he and Kate went out to dinner. "I'll have the same," Scott said.

Neil lifted his rum and Coke, the broad smile exuding his friendly nature. "Just like the old days, my friend."

"Just like the old days," Scott echoed. His smile made him look as young as when he and Neil, both single, raced in Toronto's artistic social circuit. His smile fading, Scott said soberly: "Tell me more about Tokyo."

Neil grew instantly serious. "The objective was to build marketing relationships and hopefully bring business back to Canada.

"Our team was almost perfect. Tori is bilingual, and Gloria Tennant our print media whiz, is strikingly beautiful. I know, because Betsy reminds me at every occasion." Scott smiled as he visualized Neil's wife teasing him.

"I believed the three of us could go anywhere. The beautiful, the creative and the dreamer. But we struck out in Japan."

"Why?"

"We were ignored and couldn't figure out why. Finally, Tori asked his cousin who told us it was Gloria. The Japanese can accept women working, but not as equals. They reluctantly allow women managers in America, but not in Japan. Once we learned that, Gloria would leave after the presentation so Tori and I could build relationships.

"One night we visited a geisha house with a graphic artist from Montreal and two Japanese representatives from Matsushita Corporation. It's incredible what those geisha can do to make you relax, and I don't even speak Japanese," Neil digressed, a grin spreading across his face. "Anyway - there's Tori now," Neil interrupted himself. Scott turned to see a young Japanese man about five feet six following George Bigliardi up the stairs. Scott took in the black leather bomber jacket with upturned collar, white silk scarf, heavy gold bracelet and tight designer jeans. His hair was long, pulled back in a ponytail; he grinned, chewing gum with strong white teeth. A typical artist Scott speculated, guessing Tori to be about thirty-five with the youthful appearance of many Japanese. Scott took Tori's outstretched hand, shaking it firmly.

"You must be Neil's friend from Florida," Tori greeted him.

"We've gone a few miles," Scott agreed, smiling as he glanced over at Neil. Tori sat between them, facing the restaurant's main floor below.

A waiter approached with the martini Tori had ordered at the bar on his way up. He took a long sip and paused. "Excellent," he pronounced, satisfaction spreading over his chiseled face. "Neil, I've got problems on my shoot. The agency has a new creative director with some ideas that are just plain stupid. I let him know it, in front of his client and he's really miffed. Wanted to fire me, but he couldn't. His client knew I was right."

Neil winced half-heartedly, as he looked beyond Tori to Scott. "Tori doesn't handle prima donnas very well. Now I need to stroke a few more egos before we land the next job."

"Like dealing with the Japanese?" Scott asked.

"The Japanese are different," Neil replied thoughtfully. "It's like playing cards with ...with a child. If they don't like the rules, they just change them."

Tori's breezy charm grew guarded as he shifted his gaze to Scott. "Neil said you have an interest in Japan."

Scott studied him carefully as he took a long swallow of rum. "How much time do you have?"

"All evening," Tori said, not taking his black eyes from Scott's blue ones.

"I'd better start with economic trade," Scott began.

"Are you kidding?" Neil broke in jokingly. "This guy can't balance a checkbook."

Along with Neil's effort to relax Tori with badinage, mellowness seemed to come to the young director with each sip of his martini. Scott first simplified the concept of exchange rates, then explained how governments restrict foreign products to keep competitors out of their own markets. "A company can subsidize one product from the proceeds of another, but governments can do more. They can subsidize entire industries by skimming from domestic markets.

"It's absurd how the cost of a car in Japan can equal fifty rounds of golf, or a thousand grapefruit. Most products cost significantly more than they do in America, and it's precisely those outlandish profits that are used to subsidize Japan's exports. That takes jobs from American workers."

"Everyone knows the Japanese don't play fair" Tori raised his shoulders edgily. "What's different this time?"

The restaurant below was filling, the many contented customers lending warmth to the atmosphere. "We don't do anything about it because our system of justice requires proof. Absolute proof," Scott conceded. "We keep searching for the smoking gun to see who pulled the trigger. By the time we get through all the crap and dialogue, Japan's already changed direction. They've found the economic equivalent to the Gatling gun."

"Where are you going with this?" Tori asked directly.

"A solution. Not all countries will share our free market philosophy, but at the very least, we must determine if an economy is fair to its own people. If their own citizens can't enjoy the fruits of an open market, how can we as outsiders expect to be treated?" Scott pulled a sheet of paper out of his jacket, unfolding it on the table in front of Tori. "The first thing to know is, does free trade even exist between two countries. Economists on each side of the fence usually cannot agree because they endlessly argue the crucial question; is the problem created in their economy, or ours?"

Scott pointed to a short formula on the small piece of paper. After a long pause, Tori's awareness jolted Scott's assumption that most artists had little economic understanding. "This formula doesn't seem to infringe Japan's rights." Tori's eyes remained fixed on the formula. "Japan can eliminate the penalty anytime."

"Correct," Scott replied enthusiastically. "We'll still need to look for the smoking gun, but we'll begin on a level playing field." Tori grinned, his eyes bright with comprehension.

"Hey, this guy is bright," Scott exclaimed looking at Neil.

"He doesn't have a clue what you've just said," Neil bantered.

Tori leaned back in his chair, draining his martini. "What's this got to do with me?" he said abruptly, his smile vanishing.

"You already know the answer to that question," Scott said bluntly. "The Japanese government acts as agent for the business community; your cousin's discovery demands attention. Subsidies are in contravention to agreements with the World Trade Organization, and Sachi's evidence would compel our legislators to review this formula," Scott said tapping the paper.

Tori glanced, startled, at Neil, who in turn flicked his eyes back to his old friend. Scott, recovering his manners and his compassion, said gently: "Neil told me about your cousin's death. I'm sorry."

Tori toyed with his empty martini glass for half a minute. Then he leaned toward Scott and quietly asked: "What should I do?"

"You're not dealing with amateurs," Scott said, blunt again. "I think that every detail Sachi recorded be validated and released to the public. Once their secret is published there won't be any reason to continue searching for you. Their priorities will shift to damage control and you should fade to the back burner."

"They're probably looking for Sachi's accomplices right now," Scott drew his thumb and forefinger together into the shape of a gun, aiming at Tori for emphasis. "Sachi was probably killed because of his knowledge. You face the same risk."

Tori sat quietly, apparently in deep thought. A tall thin waiter approached with purpose.

"Good evening, gentlemen. I'm Louis. I'll be serving you this evening. May I bring you another drink?"

"Another round," Neil answered quickly.

"Start at the beginning," Scott prodded as the waiter left.

Tori leaned back in his chair, sighing deeply. "On my second visit to Japan, Sachi told me he was afraid, that he didn't understand what was going on. As he gathered more data, he realized the urgency of getting the evidence to someone the Kani wouldn't suspect. Since our family ties were distant, I was the logical choice. I was okay with the arrangement; I liked him. I didn't understand the danger," Tori broke off. A moment later with a steely resolve that won Scott's respect, he began to speak in clipped efficiency.

Relating much of the same information Neil had given earlier, Tori continued: "Sachi recognized several influential men outside the Bonsai Club: the President of Osaka Brokerage, Japan's top brokerage firm; a senior executive at Yamaguchi Bank; a steel company executive, but I don't remember the name. It's written down at home. Sachi also identified an executive of a large electronics company who had been involved in a recent kickback scandal and two senior government officials. As he waited across the street more well-dressed men arrived, but the crowning moment was the Prime Minister's arrival. He was alone, so Sachi couldn't know if he was a regular Bonsai Club member or there to join the twenty kohai, the new-ones. Did Neil mention the kohai?"

"Yes," Scott replied.

"Sachi's transcripts indicate that most of the speakers are Kani members, acting as teachers, or *sempai*." Tori fell silent as the waiter brought their drinks and took their order.

"What kind of listening devices did he use?" Scott asked when they were alone again.

"They're different from the ones he was asked to replace. Sachi said they were virtually undetectable. They function within the magnetic field of the electrical wiring, piggy-backing the signal to the transformer. A small battery is needed, but no radio signals are produced. For that reason Sachi told me, if the bugs were discovered the Kani would conclude they were broken because the battery still worked. Sachi was a genius," Tori said grimly, his voice trailing off.

Taking a sip of his third martini, he regained his composure. "Sachi installed a relay transmitter outside, near the transformer; far enough away that locating them was improbable."

"Interesting." Scott cut himself off as the waiter arrived with the salad.

"It feels good to get this off my chest," Tori admitted. "The Kani exist in each community, and their members belong to private men's clubs in their own local *prefecture*. The leader of each club is addressed as chairman, but his orders come from the Bonsai Club in Tokyo.

"What's a prefecture?" Scott garbled through a mouthful of salad.

"A county, or voting district. Each prefecture elects a member to the *Diet*, the Japanese Parliament." Tori resumed his story without faltering. "The Bonsai Club is the head of the Kani, with most day-to-day decisions being made by four men. The Bonsai Chairman, a man known as Strategist; a head of security, and the *Shujin* who is the master; the big kahuna."

When the waiter returned with the main course, Tori changed the subject to his background and personal life. He recalled how the Canadian government had stripped his family of their citizenship rights during the war, and the resulting shock and sorrow his parents had suffered. Scott listened intently. It was clear that Tori's experience had left a lasting imprint, tempering an otherwise easygoing nature.

"It's as good as I remember," Scott said separating a small lamb steak from its rib. They quietly finished their meal and ordered cognac and coffee.

Leaning forward, Tori gathered his thoughts before resuming. "The Kani have created a psychological treadmill the kohai can't recognize; an emotional roller coaster they don't dare get off."

"You're talking conspiracy involving Japan's top business leaders," Scott said quietly. "How do they manage such a cover-up?"

"Can't say," Tori shrugged. "My suspicion is the sempai's control results from something more than fear and raw power. There is always a sempai in the communication room, listening, taking notes, analyzing each kohai's response to a question. Scripts are continually updated, available to the sempai at a moment's notice should they wish to probe old wounds or restore a confidence. Emotions are carefully controlled."

"Sounds like a lab experiment," Neil scowled.

"Exactly. It doesn't matter if the kohai agrees or disagrees with the original question, the sempai encourage him to reinforce his own conclusion. When that has been firmly established, they set out to destroy his foundation. Conflict is inevitable.

"There's more, but it might be easier if you read the transcripts yourself. They're at my house."

Scott shifted his frame, realizing his left leg had gone to sleep. He had been completely absorbed in Tori's story. "I'd like that."

"Sounds dangerous as hell," Neil objected. "If they find a trail leading to Tori, he's dead meat."

"You're right," Scott agreed. "That's all the more reason to move fast. As I said before, documentation and then exposure, is Tori's best bet."

Thoughtfully, Tori ran his fingers through his black hair. "Let's do it. It's only a matter of time before those tapes are traced to me anyway."

"You've got my support." Neil threw an arm around Tori's shoulders. Tori grinned, shrugging off the arm in a macho gesture.

"I've got to see those transcripts," Scott said impatiently, throwing plastic on the table and motioning to the waiter.

- Chapter 4 -

Neil tossed the parking ticket on the console, started the engine, then pulled quickly into the stream of headlights moving north on Church Street. Scott snatched the ticket.

"Glove box?" he asked rhetorically.

"Yup," Neil replied as he wheeled past a double-parked car and made a left onto Bloor Street.

"You haven't changed," Scott laughed in recognition, cramming the ticket into a stack of old parking citations.

"Neil just calls it the cost of doing business," Tori chuckled from the back seat.

The brightly lit stores and theater marquees lifted Scott's spirits. He wistfully compared the city night to the peace and quiet of Fort Myers, as the Jag careened around the corner of Belson Street heading into the fashionable Yorkville district. Neat rows of beautifully restored Victorian garden homes nestled behind old oak and maple trees, grew larger and more expensive. Neil turned left on Maple Street, accelerating toward Tori's home. The homes were old, but had been refurbished to suit the upper income young professionals who owned them.

As they reached Tori's block, they saw up ahead the flashing lights of several Toronto Metro police cars bathing the houses in an eerie rotating glow.

"What the hell is going on?" Tori's voice cracked with concern as Neil slowed the Jag.

"Don't know," Neil said flatly.

Tori's house lights were on and the front door stood wide open. "Park over there," Tori demanded.

"Don't stop," Scott barked. "Something's not right."

"Why?" Neil demanded.

"Just do it. I'll explain."

Driving cautiously past the flashing lights, Neil turned at the corner and stopped at the curb.

"That brown car parked on the other side of the street made me suspicious. I sensed someone in the car watching, but I'm not sure," Scott said.

"I've got to check my house," Tori insisted, his voice quivering.

"Okay, Tori, but take my cell phone." Scott said as he dialed Neil's cell. "We'll listen and talk to you as you go down the street. If anyone comes after you, shout."

"Okay," Tori said grimly.

"When you reach the house, let us know what's going on so we can figure out the next move."

"One step at a time," Tori mumbled as he climbed out of the back seat into the darkness.

"I'm approaching the house. Three parked cars about two hundred meters down the road," Tori reported. A moment later he added: "That brown car on the other side of the road is a late model Chrysler, with two men sitting in the front seat."

"Jesus!" Tori gasped as the sound of a siren came through the phone. "Its okay guys, it startled me. An ambulance just pulled away."

"From your house?" Neil asked sharply.

"Yes."

* * * * *

A tall thin Toronto Metro police officer stood at the door. "Who are you?" the officer demanded, blocking the way.

"Tori Tahashi. This is my house."

"This way," the officer said. "Detective Bennett, Mr. Tahashi lives here."

"What happened?" Tori demanded.

"Any reason anyone would want to rob you? Do you keep any valuables or cash on hand?" Detective Bennett asked in a businesslike manner. The impersonal tone chilled Tori.

"Nothing of importance; a few documents, research notes for a book, and some marketing ideas. What happened?"

"Any threats on your life?" Bennett probed.

Tori felt himself pale. "No. Why do you ask?"

"Your neighbor saw three men break into your home and called us. Our officers intercepted three Asians inside, one carrying an automatic weapon." Detective Bennett paused, eyeing Tori intently.

Tori's brain raced. He couldn't mention the Kani. Pulling himself together, he said as calmly as he could: "No one has threatened me. I don't know why this has happened. Was anyone hurt?"

Bennett waited so long to answer, Tori wondered if the policeman was going to tell him. Then Bennett motioned him to follow, as he strode into the kitchen. Turning to face Tori, he said: "The intruder downstairs threw a 'Japanese throwing star'. It caught an officer in his breast bone."

"Is he all right?"

"The medics said he's going to make it. He lay there." Detective Bennett pointed to a small pool of blood on the floor. "I'd like you to check the house to see if anything's missing."

Tori lunged for the stairs, Bennett following close behind. Entering his bedroom, Tori stood in disbelief, anger building. He'd been violated. Clothes tossed everywhere. Desk and bureau drawers removed and thrown onto the bed, their contents scattered. Turning quickly, Tori sighed with relief at the sight of the antique Indian rug undisturbed on the oak floor beside the bed. Hurrying over, he pushed the rug aside, revealing his floor safe. Kneeling, Tori removed the top panel and dialed the combination. The safe popped open. Everything intact.

"You'd better check it," Bennett advised, kneeling beside Tori. Tori made a quick inventory. His passport, life insurance policies, a couple of semi-precious stones, and Sachi's tapes, all seven of them. "What are those?" the detective demanded.

"Notes for a book," Tori lied. "Everything's here." He closed the safe and replaced the carpet. Bennett followed Tori into the next room, which Tori used as a studio. The large closet where he stored summer clothes, now appeared like a tumble of shredded rags.

"Damn!" He crossed to a large artist's pad resting on the drafting table near the window. It hadn't been touched. Next to the drafting table, a storage rack holding his sketches had been knocked over. They lay crumpled on the floor. He felt sick as he looked at the destruction of his work. Muttering obscenities under his breath, Tori moved to the desk, where the drawers had been emptied and thrown on the floor. He searched for Sachi's transcripts. He'd left them on top of the desk. Gone. He panicked as his eyes fastened on the computer.

Bennett noticed Tori's distress. "You can check the computer; just watch how you touch it. Fingerprints."

Flipping the switch with the end of a pencil, Tori waited for the computer to complete its boot routine. Manipulating the keyboard with a pencil, Tori's worst fears glared from the computer screen. The files were gone. The entire drive had been erased. Tori began to sweat. He turned the computer off and stared at his disk storage box. Even the backup disks were gone.

"What's missing?" Bennett asked.

"It was ...they were ...just notes," Tori stammered. "Notes for a book on Japan. My cousin and I spent hours on research and it was all on the computer." Too late, Tori tensed, silently cursing himself. Even this might be telling too much.

With Bennett on his heels Tori checked the living room, dining room, kitchen and small family room on the main floor. Objects were strewn about, but nothing appeared to be missing. Many prized pieces of Chinese and Japanese art were broken wantonly. His face grew crimson with rage. "Shit!" he swore through gritted teeth, banging his fist against the wall.

He stomped down the basement stairs to check the game room, workshop and furnace room. He quickly moved to the garage. Nothing had been touched. Thank God for little favors. The thieves had missed his pride and joy, a '63 split window Corvette. For one brief moment, overjoyed, the pristine car released his mind from the grim realities of the Kani.

Then the thought of Sachi - poor Sachi! Left him cold and fearful again.

* * * * *

Scott and Neil waited silently in the Jag, the windows open. The smell of Corinthian leather mingling with the cool spring air made Scott realize how much he missed the change of seasons in Florida. There was indeed a price to pay for living in paradise. There was always a price to be paid. Always.

"We need to know if that brown Chrysler is a threat," Scott said at last. "Let's grab a cab and drive by to see what's happening."

"Nah, we can do it now," Neil said, seizing the chance for adventure with an alacrity that made Scott grin, even as he shook his head. Apparently he was not the only one with traces of ambivalence about his settled, comfortable life.

"These guys are professionals, Neil. They're protecting trillions of dollars in trade."

"Okay," Neil conceded grudgingly.

"I'll take a cab. You stand by for Tori's call."

"Let's do it." Neil started the Jag, accelerating down the road toward Bloor Street. Pulling to the curb just short of the Yorkville subway entrance they spotted several taxis. "No unnecessary risks, okay?" Neil cautioned.

Scott replied only with an ironic grin as he jumped out and walked to the line of waiting taxis. He slid into the back seat of the first cab.

"Maple Street, please."

"Yes sir."

"Then drive around the block and through the back alley," Scott instructed, thrusting a hundred dollar bill toward the driver. "This is in addition to your fare."

"No problem, sir!"

Two minutes later the driver advised. "Maple is two blocks up."

"Make the next left onto Elm, a right into the first alley then a left into the alley going down the block. Go as slow as you can without attracting attention."

They passed Tori's house ablaze with electricity. The back door stood ajar; a police car was parked in a narrow parking space behind the house.

"Which way?" the driver asked as they neared the end of the alley.

"Left, and take the alley back to Elm Street. Go around the block and drive down Maple. Go slow, as if you're looking for an address." Scott spied the brown Chrysler. Through the eerie glow of powerful streetlights he saw movement, someone ducking down he thought. His stomach tightened. When they reached the end of the street Scott told the driver, "Drop me off where you picked me up." He passed a twenty dollar bill over the seat. "Keep the change."

Scott exited the cab at the subway entrance, crossed the street and trotted the hundred yards to Neil's Jaguar. "I think the house is being watched by someone in the brown Chrysler," Scott said.

"That's not good." Neil started the Jag as his cell phone trilled.

"The cops are gone. Where are you?" Tori said excitedly.

"You're being watched," Neil warned coolly. "We don't want them to see the Jag. Take a cab to the Club Blue Note. You know the doorman, so go to the front of the line and tell him it's urgent. When you're inside, slip out the exit into the back alley. We'll be waiting."

"On my way."

* * * * *

Sitting in the Jag at the entrance to the alley, Scott spotted the brown Chrysler as it pulled to the curb. Tori was talking to the doorman at the front of the line outside the

Blue Note. The driver waited, motor idling as a man jumped from the passenger side. Scott could see him clearly, hurrying across the street to the Blue Note. He was Asian, short, wearing an expensive suit white shirt and tie. Neil slipped the Jag in gear and lurched into the alley. Tori rushed through the club's back door as the Jag braked, diving into the back seat. Neil punched the accelerator before the door slammed shut.

"They got the transcripts and the back-up disks, but they didn't get the tapes," Tori gasped.

Neil must be nervous despite his cool exterior, Scott thought. He was driving far too fast. "Slow down, we don't want to be stopped," he warned. "Let's go to my hotel. We'll think better if we're not running."

"Good. I need a drink," Neil expelled a heaving breath.

Scott turned to face Tori. "If they've got your transcripts, they may think that's all Sachi sent you. They may not know about the tapes. What was on the back-up disks?"

"I use them to bring data back and forth from the office. It's possible there's a copy on the back-up. Why?"

"It'll add to their confusion," Scott replied.

"How so?" Tori asked.

"Presumably they won't know the source, so they won't know if you transcribed it, or Sachi, or whether a third person is involved. They'll wonder if the source is handwritten notes, or tape recordings. It adds more variables."

"That's true," Tori admitted. "Although it doesn't save my skin."

"Do you have copies of the back-up disks, or are Sachi's source tapes the only copy?"

"On my computer at the office."

"At Creative Concepts?" Scott asked hopefully.

"Way to go, you little asshole," Neil roared over his shoulder to the back seat. "Are you trying to get us all killed?"

"We better get them tonight," Scott said crisply.

Neil made a hard left in silent compliance.

"I don't think you should go home until this is resolved," Scott warned, turning back to Tori.

"I won't," Tori agreed fervently.

Neil pulled into the converted warehouse's short driveway. Just past the loading dock he pulled into the garage and closed the door behind them. They moved quickly through the main studio. Hitting the light switch, Neil was the first up the stairs to the mezzanine and Tori's office. Scott felt exposed under the bright lights, a target through the expanse of dark windows. "Hurry," he urged.

Tori flipped the computer's switch and waited for it to boot.

"Let's load the files into my laptop," Scott suggested urgently, opening his computer.

"Right." Tori passed a thumb drive to Scott.

Within minutes the transfer was complete. "I've deleted the files," Tori said pulling a file labeled Kani out of the lower desk drawer. "Here's the only other copy of the transcript."

"Let's get out of here," Neil muttered brusquely.

Fifteen minutes later, the three sat in Scott's hotel room overlooking Toronto Island's lights, twinkling across the cold water. Scott jumped at a knock on the door. Room service ...their drinks.

"You're not going to work tomorrow." Scott said to Tori, more as confirmation than a question as soon as the waiter left.

"Hell no. I'd better lay low for a while."

"There's an extra bed," Scott pointed. "You're welcome to it. We can make plans in the morning."

"I appreciate it," Tori replied quickly.

"I'll get to the office first thing in the morning and assign Tori's projects," Neil said.

"Damn you, Tori. Now I've got to massage all those clients who believe the sun shines out of your ass."

"You'll be able to see if anyone's looking for him," Scott ruminated, preoccupied. "I've got an appointment with the U.S. Commerce Department in Washington next week, which I'll try move forward. I'll also see if I can catch a friendly ear at the CIA."

Tori looked with alarm at Neil, who nodded reassuringly. Tori voiced his concern anyway. "I hope you plan to keep a low profile. The Kani's influence reaches pretty far."

"Don't worry." Scott replied distractedly, setting aside his drink for his laptop.

Tori slammed back his martini as if it were water. "My nerves are shot. I need another."

"I'll pass," Scott replied. "I want to read these transcripts."

"I'm going upstairs for a drink," Tori pushed rebelliously. "My adrenaline is still pumping."

"Tori's head will spin in that rotating lounge upstairs. I'd better join him," Neil said, unabashed at his flimsy excuse. "I'll talk to you in the morning."

Two hours later, scanning his laptop Scott admitted to himself that Tori's fear was fully justified. We need more information he said to himself as he turned the lights out, before Tori had returned from easing his mind.

- Chapter 5 -

Toronto

Thursday, April 23, 11:15 p.m.

At twenty-five Leni Yakata had been accepted by the Kani. Fifteen years later, he was senior supervisor at the House of Science and Technology, a private company owned by five influential Japanese businessmen. The company, registered in public records as engaged in all areas of research, had never advertised. In reality the company maintained only one client: the Kani. The offices were located in the Bonsai Building on the side facing Meiji dori.

Japan had disbanded all intelligence agencies as a condition of surrender in World War II. Recognizing the need for industrial espionage, the House of Science & Technology had been established in 1948 to support Japanese manufacturing's effort to mass-produce Western products. No serious threat to its client's hidden agenda had ever been felt. Until now.

This case was different, Yakata thought in frustration as he threw his jacket on the bed of his hotel room. It involved the protection of the Kani itself. He reached for his cell

phone. It was time to advise Tokyo of his failure. Sachi Yoshida's death had already been viewed as a mistake. His critics would consider this latest failure still more harshly.

At least he had discovered evidence at his home that several courier packages had been sent to a Mr. Tori Tahashi in Toronto, he thought, glowering. He had left Tokyo on the first available flight to handle the case personally.

Yakata waited patiently as the call was transferred to his director, Hiroji Mashita. "What do you have to report?" Mashita snapped.

"We've searched Mr. Tahashi's house and found a file containing English transcripts of conversations in the Great Hall, and in the kohai's rooms," Yakata replied.

"Did you discover the source?" Mashita demanded.

"We were discovered, and later he escaped when we tried to apprehend him," Yakata said apologetically.

"We have exposed ourselves," Mashita said calmly. Yakata heard the anger beneath the polite tone. "Apprehend him quickly, and if you can't control the situation, terminate immediately. His knowledge can go no further."

Yakata bowed his head instinctively. "It will be done."

- Chapter 6 -

Toronto

Friday, April 24, 7:00 a.m.

The sun from a cloudless Toronto sky filtered around the edge of the curtains. Scott glanced at the other bed. Tori was there. Still in the land of the living Scott thought smiling grimly, as he slipped out of bed toward the bathroom. A shower and shave left him refreshed. The mirror reassured him that his nervousness was well disguised; his tanned smiling face expressed only ease and confidence.

As Scott came out of the bathroom Tori rose, stretching his lean well-defined frame and stifling a yawn. He wore only expensive blue silk boxer shorts. "Neil's a hard guy to keep up with," he said, rubbing his eyes. "I feel like shit."

"You play, you pay," Scott answered philosophically, reaching for his pants.

A few minutes after seven Scott dialed Governor Billings' residence. An aide answered. A moment later the governor was on the telephone.

"Good morning, Governor. Thanks for the contact at the Commerce Department. I'm in Toronto, following a lead on my trade thesis."

"What can I do?" Billings asked, more than politely; with genuine interest.

"Do you know anyone in the CIA specializing in Japan? I have a solid lead pointing to a conspiracy, and I'd like to bounce it off someone before I go to Tokyo."

"You're going to Japan?"

"I need answers. But I don't want to get in over my head. If it's too dangerous I'll back off."

"David Burnside. We were in the same Marine unit about twenty years ago and we've kept in touch. He was just promoted to deputy director. He's bright with both feet on the ground; but imaginative too. A valuable and rare combination.

"Do you have his office number?" Scott asked.

"We can do better than that. I'll tell him to expect your call."

"Thanks, John."

"No problem. If I don't get through I'll leave a message for him to expect to hear from you. Wait a half-hour."

Scott took Burnside's number and hung up.

Room service had come and gone by the time Tori emerged from the bathroom. Grabbing a handful of grapes, he said abruptly: "If you're going to pursue this affair, I'd like to be involved."

"Think about it" Scott warned. "Our biggest advantage is that they don't know me."

"I'll be careful," Tori said, undeterred. "Sachi was my cousin, and my friend."

Scott accepted Tori's determination and plunged into his plan. "I'm trying to move up my appointment with the Commerce Department and meet with the CIA about our Japanese friends," he said, punching keys on his computer. Good, he thought. Doris

had the Commerce Department's phone number on his electronic mail. Five minutes later Scott had the last appointment for that afternoon.

Next he dialed the number Governor Billings had given him. He was transferred to Deputy Director Burnside's car phone. "Governor Billings told me to expect your call. What can I do for you?"

"I've been working on a trade formula which quantifies the economic imbalance we have with Japan. I'm looking at how the Japanese manipulate markets."

"You want my help to validate your thesis?" Burnside said with a note of dismissal, verging on contempt.

"Not exactly," Scott answered evenly. "I've learned there's a conspiracy at the highest level of the Japanese government. I've seen transcripts indicating a secret agency in Tokyo. I'd like to discuss it in private."

"Cartels are not new in Japan."

"This is more than a cartel. I'm talking about collusion between business and government. The Japanese are directing benefits from domestic industries to export industries. That hurts America. The participation of senior government officials in an economic cabal is a violation of our peace treaty."

"Tell me more about this conspiracy," Mr. Maxwell. "Quick summary."

Scott sighed. "I'm sure your line is secure, but I'm not so sure about this end. We had a run-in with members of this organization in Toronto last night. They confiscated evidence and tried to apprehend my contact."

Burnside softened his confrontational manner. "You have my attention. I'll be in D.C. this evening. I can meet for dinner at six-thirty, or in my office tomorrow morning at ten."

"Dinner is good," Scott said. "Pick the restaurant."

"The Verandah Restaurant on Winston Street, six-thirty."

Scott hung up. Tori shook his head. "Man. I don't know how you do that. I rarely get past the executive secretary."

Scott laughed. "We're leaving for Washington."

"Let me at least get the tickets." Tori reached for the telephone on the coffee table.

"How'll you pay for them?" Scott asked.

"Credit card."

"What happens when they trace your account?"

"Damn," Tori said, chagrined.

"My secretary will make reservations, using a fake name for you. If customs notice the discrepancy when they clear your passport, I'll say my office hadn't been sure who'd be accompanying me."

"I don't have the mind for this espionage shit," Tori shrugged.

Scott was zipping his suitcase when the phone rang. "I've made reservations for you and a Ben Tomori on US Air #278 out of Toronto at 11:15, arriving Washington at 1:28 with a stop in Pittsburgh," Doris said. "The tickets can be picked up at the ticket counter."

"Thanks. Now, please call my brother, Ken. See if he can fly my Cessna to Washington. We'll return to Fort Myers tomorrow afternoon. And call Kate. Tell her I'll call later."

In the lobby Scott stopped at a men's shop, eyeing a light brown tweed jacket in the window. "Tori, that black leather jacket you're wearing will stand out at the airport like a bikini in a convent."

"Watch it," Tori joked. "I went to Catholic school."

Fifteen minutes later, Tori looked like a successful young Asian on vacation.

Scott disliked Terminal One, the oldest of the three Toronto airport terminals. The building was round, and the corridor followed its circular exterior wall in seemingly endless fashion. To hapless walkers, the murals expanding into view blended like a nightmare from Alice in Wonderland; a scene heightened by the anxiety of non-English speaking travelers lost in the maze.

The ticketing agent was processing the seat assignment when Tori grunted: "There." Scott turned to follow Tori's stare; down the terminal.

"He doesn't fit," Tori said, nodding toward an Asian man wearing a suit and reading a newspaper. He was alone, standing against a wall in a remote part of the terminal. "If he was waiting for anyone, he'd be nearer a shop or waiting area."

The Asian turned away as Scott caught his eye, raising his newspaper too high for reading comfort. "He might be the man who followed you into the Blue Note," Scott said, assessing. "Keep calm, customs is just over there." Scott and Tori walked over to it casually.

After several standard questions they cleared customs and then security and moved toward the boarding area. As Scott and Tori approached the first gate, Scott noticed the Asian clear security and follow. Scott nudged Tori to pick up the pace. "We don't want him to know where we're going." Tori nodded grimly as they strolled past their gate already beginning to fill with passengers. Boarding would commence in five minutes.

They continued down the corridor. At the next gate Scott noticed a second Asian suit. As the man spotted them approaching, he turned his back quickly. "We've picked up someone else," Scott whispered.

The next gate, US Air #1342 to Los Angeles with a stop in Chicago, had begun boarding. Scott pulled Tori toward the gate. They strode briskly as if fearing to be late for their flight. Scott flashed his boarding pass to the attendant at the counter, who nodded them on. They walked past the short female attendant collecting boarding passes. She glared. Scott called: "We'll be right back."

She raised her hand to protest, but they disappeared down the mechanical tunnel. "What are we doing?" Tori protested. "We'll be trapped."

"Come on," Scott answered tersely.

The flight attendant standing at the aircraft's door flashed her eyes in alarm as they burst through the door to the ramp the pilots use for pre-flight inspections, and ran down the steel stairs to the tarmac. Racing back toward the terminal one level below the departure gate, they brought up short at a pair of glass doors.

"Damn," Scott cursed as he yanked fruitlessly on the locked doors. "This way!" He turned left and ran toward the next set of glass doors. "Locked too," he panted.

"What do we do now?" Tori swiveled at the competing alarms now ringing from various parts of the terminal.

"Maybe there." Scott pointed to a door with a small sign marked US AIR - PERSONNEL ONLY. Tori followed Scott through the door into a ground crew lounge area. Four men wearing US Air uniforms looked up in surprise.

"Which way out?" Scott raised his voice above the alarm siren. A baggage handler pointed down the room. "Thanks," Scott said.

Bright lights checked them as they burst through the windowless door into the arrivals concourse. Two Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers stood about twenty feet away.

"Halt," the taller officer commanded. They obeyed. Custody was probably the safest place they could be for the moment. The delay would undoubtedly make them miss their flight, but you couldn't always have everything.

The officers patted them for weapons, then led them to the RCMP offices off the main concourse.

"You ran onto a restricted area, a federal offense carrying a heavy penalty," the senior officer began aggressively.

"We were being chased by two men - Asians - who broke into my friend's home last night," Scott explained. "A Metro police officer was hurt. We were afraid for our lives." The constable's nameplate read "McShane."

"What were these Asian men after?" the second constable, whose nameplate read "Kershaw," asked Tori.

"I'm not sure. I'm writing a book about Japan; my Japanese collaborator was killed mysteriously several weeks ago. Some of my notes were taken. There may be a connection."

"What's the Metro detective's name?" McShane asked.

"Bennett," Tori replied. Scott anxiously compared the time of the electric clock on the wall to his Patek Philippe.

"We'll check," McShane nodded to Kershaw.

"Do you know Gord Riley?" Scott casually asked as Kershaw hung up the phone. "He was a friend of mine in high school. I think he joined the RCMP."

"Don't know him," McShane said, but his voice softened a little. "Anything?" McShane asked, turning to Kershaw.

"Their story checks out."

McShane switched channel to Airport Police, on his handheld radio. "Have you found anything?"

"Lots of Asian's out here, but we haven't found anyone fitting the description."

"We appreciate the look."

"I guess you're free to go. But stay out of prohibited areas or next time there'll be charges."

Scott glanced at his watch again. "We've missed our flight. May I use your phone?"

"Sure," McShane pointed to the desk. Scott dialed Toronto Island Aviation Services, the only repair facility on the Island. Scott knew it well; he had kept his first airplane there, many years earlier. "Is Steve Larson around? Scott Maxwell calling."

"He's on the tarmac with a student."

"Can you page him? He'll appreciate it."

"Yes, sir. Please hold."

The familiar voice blasted into the receiver. "Long time no see! Where the hell have you been?" Steve shouted.

"I'll tell you in person. What are you doing this afternoon?"

"No plans. I'm just scratching my head from a failed multi-engine instrument check ride. The examiner wouldn't fly because the fire extinguisher's expiry date was last week. More bureaucratic bullshit."

"Some things never change," Scott laughed. "What are you flying these days?"

"A real nice twin, a Cessna 410 with a few mods on it. Fast with lots of controls. Fun to fly."

"Are you up for a quick flight to Washington, D.C.? I have a four o'clock meeting."

"Let's do it. I'll file the flight plan and see you when? Thirty minutes?"

"I should be there a little after 12:15. We'll have an extra passenger. File as a Canadian citizen."

"Will do."

"Constable," Scott asked politely as he hung up the phone, "where's the closest taxi area? We need to get to Toronto Island Airport."

"I'm clocking off duty now," McShane said, trading his red coat for a blue nylon jacket. "I'm going to the customs warehouse at the harbor, next to the airport. You're welcome to a lift."

"We'd appreciate it." Scott and Tori exchanged grins, relieved at the prospect of a police escort. The Kani seemed far away, once more.

* * * * *

Yakata smiled to himself as he spotted Tori, the unknown man and now another. Three, now. No matter, he thought as they stepped into the elevator.

Yakata had taken the ground level and assigned three subordinate agents covering the upper levels. The first man was on level two, the concourse departure level. The second man waited on level three in a green Toyota van near the exit of the parking garage, with parking levels situated above. The third man waited in a black Nissan sports car near the down ramp of parking level four. The upper parking levels were not under surveillance, but anyone driving out would need to drive through the two lower parking levels before reaching the exit.

"The target and his accomplice have just entered the elevator at the arrivals level with another man, wearing a dark blue jacket. Advise when they get off," Yakata said into his small hand-held radio.

The agent waiting in the Toyota van watched the elevator door open. "They're on level three. Close in," the agent spoke into his radio. The three men emerged from the elevator and walked to the reserved parking area near the exit. "*Kuso* - shit," the agent swore as he realized they were heading for a car in a restricted parking section next to the exit booth. They would not pass his van.

The Kani agent quietly slipped out of the Toyota van. He couldn't wait for help. He had orders to kill if he couldn't successfully grab the suspect. He decided to take out Tori's associates, then try for the grab.

Just as they reached McShane's Ford LTD sedan, the Kani's agent fired a short burst from his Uzi at McShane, less than fifty feet away. He shouldn't have missed, but

McShane had been making for the driver's side of the car when he suddenly veered around a concrete pillar to unlock the passenger side door. Bullets bounced off the round concrete post as the shooter followed his path. The ricochet echoed deafeningly within the vast garage complex. Tori dove behind the pillar as McShane dropped into the crouch position and moved to the rear of the Ford with his extended arm holding a service revolver. Scott fell to the ground as another gun burst spat bullets over them.

McShane took aim and squeezed off two quick shots. The sniper went down, one bullet square in the chest, the other above the left eye. McShane moved low around the car as the smell of gun powder filled the air. Scott scrambled to a crouch as McShane moved past, both turning at the sound of more shots. A second man ran down the ramp, his Uzi spitting fire. In a detached part of his mind Scott registered the *ping, ping, ping* of spent shell casings bouncing on the concrete floor. McShane went down. His revolver clattering on the floor just inches from Scott's hand. Instinct took over as Scott rolled and grabbed. Dragging the gun in a quick sweeping motion, Scott aimed and fired, catching the sniper in the stomach. The gunman staggered but didn't go down. The Uzi fired wildly hitting the back of the Ford.

Scott's second shot went high from the jarring recoil of McShane's 357. He pulled the gun down, took aim and fired again. Smack in the chest. The Uzi fell from the assassin's grip, clattering on the cement.

Scott could see from McShane's movements that he was alive. "Check him," he yelled to Tori. Scott scanned for more snipers as he slunk around the side of the Ford, opened the driver's door and found the police radio under the dash. Thank God, he thought in prayerful gratitude. "Officer down. Shoot-out in the parking garage Terminal One." Scott moved to join Tori who was now bending over McShane. "How is he?" Scott watched the stain on McShane's white shirt spread darkly under the open jacket.

"Two bullets, both low and to the right. He needs to get to the hospital quickly," Tori said quietly as McShane squirmed, moaning.

Sirens approached. A few moments later the screaming wail bounced off the garage's ceilings and floors as a black and white Ford with the RCMP seal screeched to a stop, blocking the exit forty feet away. The lone RCMP officer jumped out of the car, gun drawn. Another officer ran up the ramp. "Put down your weapon," the officer shouted from the car. Scott slowly placed McShane's handgun on the ground.

"On the ground, face down," the officer yelled. "Now!" He approached, gun ready as Scott and Tori complied. "Check the constable," he ordered the airport policeman who had run up the ramp.

Moments later constable Kershaw emerged from the stairwell near the elevators and joined the policeman next to McShane. After a quick analysis he joined the other officer.

"Let these two up. They were with McShane. He says they saved his life. Secure the area. I'll take their statements." "Wait here," Kershaw told Scott and Tori, as he returned to McShane.

He returned minutes later, after the Emergency Medical Services vehicle arrived. "What happened?" he asked Scott. Tori remained pale and silent as Scott described events. When he was finished, Scott asked apologetically, "I don't want to seem insensitive, but we have an urgent flight to catch."

"We'll need your statement first," Kershaw replied tersely. He turned and yelled, "Anyone have a tape recorder?"

"In the black and white," the RCMP officer yelled over the noise of a jet climbing overhead.

A man and woman wearing the dark blue uniform of York County Emergency Medical Services worked on McShane, connecting tubes and monitors to him as they secured the stretcher. "An air ambulance should be on the garage roof shortly," the woman shouted to Kershaw when he returned from the black and white.

"Friday, April 24, at twelve ten p.m., in Terminal One parking garage. An eyewitness statement by Mr. Scott Maxwell." Kershaw thrust the small recorder into Scott's hand. "Give a complete report." He listened to every word as Scott gave his statement. He posed no additional questions and Scott returned the recorder.

"Friday, April 24, at twelve eighteen P.M., in Terminal One parking garage. An eyewitness statement by ...say your name and give your report," Kershaw instructed handing the electronic instrument to Tori.

Scott heard a helicopter land overhead as Tori spoke into the recorder.

"You'll need to sign these statements when they're transcribed," Kershaw said.

"We'll be available," Scott promised. He stared at the spot where McShane had lain, listening to the helicopter recede into the distance. "Can we go?" he asked, after a moment.

"Is there anything you want to add to the statement you made downstairs?" Kershaw demanded.

"No," Scott and Tori said in unison.

"All right. You can go. We'll call if we have more questions. Take care on your way out of here," Kershaw added, with a touch of irony.

Tori grimaced as he caught Scott's eye. "Thanks," Scott answered the police officer dryly. "We'll do our best."

* * * * *

Twenty minutes later, Scott and Tori walked through the double doors of Toronto Island's small terminal building. There had been no further incident on the way. Scott grinned as he caught sight of Steve Larson at the other end of the room. He called out, and Steve immediately turned and strode toward them. Scott gave his old friend a warm handshake. "Tori Tahashi, Steve Larson, the pilot who taught me everything I know."

"Pleased to meet you." Tori extended his hand.

Scott peered over Steve's shoulder to the Cessna 410 parked on the tarmac. "Let's go. We can talk in the air."

The plane was parked less than forty feet away. "Take the left seat," Steve offered.

"Another training flight?" Scott chuckled.

"I always make my passengers fly. But I won't blow smoke in your eyes today," Steve laughed.

"Thanks." Scott remembered the hours of instrument training with a hood restricting his vision to the airplane's instruments. Relaxed in the right seat smoking a cigar, Steve would occasionally blow smoke under the hood, yelling: "Simulated fog!"

Steve started the engines, received taxi clearance and had the 410 moving to the active runway within two minutes. "Aircraft is yours," he said after aligning the airplane at the end of the runway.

"Fox-Trot Oscar Xray, you're cleared for immediate departure, right turn approved, your discretion," the speaker blared as Scott pushed the throttle levers forward to the stops, gently pushing the rudder peddle. "Roger," Steve said into the microphone as he motioned a right turn with his thumb.

The 410 went into a climbing right turn heading over Lake Ontario. Scott rolled back level on a heading of 165 degrees, climbing to 12,500 feet toward an electronic beacon on a hill outside Elmira, New York.

As they approached the New York shore, Scott announced, "Aircraft is yours." He turned to Tori in the back seat. "Pass me the cell phone."

Scott dialed his office. "Doris. Tori and I didn't make our connection, and we're on a private flight to Dulles. I might be ten minutes late for my appointment with Levens, so please let him know. Book us into a hotel under the company name and register Tori as Ben Tomori, again. Oh, and fax my free trade thesis to Levens. He's expecting it."

"Right away. Your brother Ken said you're in luck. He was supposed to fly a client's Lear jet to Oklahoma yesterday, but the trip was postponed. He'll have your plane in Dulles this evening, but he says your single engine Cessna is boring."

"He's said that for years. Make sure my hotel room has two beds. He can stay with me."

* * * * *

Ed Levens at the Commerce Department leaned back in his chair with a frown. He didn't like delayed appointments, especially on Friday afternoon. Ordinarily he would have canceled the meeting, but his boss had specifically requested he handle the appointment. This Maxwell was well connected.

His secretary walked into his office carrying coffee and the fax he was waiting for. "Thanks," he said, reaching across the desk for his glasses. He leaned back in his chair with the three page document.

An hour later, as he finished reading the paper and going over his notes for a third time, Levens made a final comment in the margin.

"Brilliant," he said aloud. "It's the knot that ties market economies together. The common denominator."

* * * * *

"Dulles approach, this is Charley Fox-Trot Oscar Xray, Cessna 410 thirty miles north at four thousand, request landing, over," Steve advised. Dulles approach replied with an abbreviated call sign: "Canadian Fox, Squawk 4326, maintain four thousand, heading one eight zero."

Scott adjusted the heading a few degrees.

"Canadian Fox, maintain heading, cleared to two thousand, keep your speed up. We'll sequence you in on zero niner left."

"Roger," Steve replied as Scott pushed the nose down.

"Canadian Fox, confirm you need customs."

"Affirmative," Steve replied, knowing the customs building was near the end of the runway.

The DME measured four miles to the airport when the DC-9 touched down. Scott scanned the right window finding the US Air 727 turning on final approach with its lights on, about ten miles out. "Canadian Fox, contact tower at 123.85."

"Roger," Steve said, switching to the second radio, already set to the new frequency. "Dulles Tower, Canadian Fox with you."

"Cleared to land."

Scott banked hard left, lining the Cessna to the center of the runway, reduced power, and made a high speed touchdown nearly halfway down the long runway. Steve switched back to the first radio where he had preset ground control frequency as Scott taxied off the runway.

"Nice," Steve said. "Why taxi to customs, when you can fly to it? A gonzo pilot in a three-piece."

"Damn, that was nice," Tori agreed, in his first words since leaving Toronto.

Scott grinned as Steve requested clearance to the customs building immediately ahead and left of the taxiway. As they waited for customs to clear them and inspect the aircraft, Scott pulled out his cell phone.

"Doris, we're in D.C."

"Mr. Levens said he'll wait, but you'd better hustle. You and Ben Tomori are booked into the Watergate Hotel under DoorWays Corporation."

After a brief customs inspection Scott and Tori grabbed a cab. Thirty five minutes later the driver pulled up in front of the Commerce Department's modern six-story glass and cement building on Pennsylvania Avenue.

"Check us in at the hotel," Scott said to Tori, stepping out into the warm afternoon sun. "Remember, you're Ben Tomori. I'll see you after my dinner meeting."

"And watch your back," he added before closing the cab door. "I know I'll be watching mine."

"Damn," Tori muttered, quietly.

- Chapter 7 -

Scott jumped both stairs to the Verandah Restaurant's entrance, precisely at 6:30. He was pumped. His meeting with Levens had given him strong encouragement. His thoughts went back to the Kani as the maitre d' led him across the piano bar's hardwood floors, then through a set of French doors to the outdoor patio of the old Victorian mansion. Shrubbery and trees interspersed with white painted lattices enclosed the lush, flower-speckled rear garden. The scent and sight of gardenias and cherry blossoms in all their glory overwhelmed him. He was led to a table at the edge of the lawn. The man sitting looked like a former pro football player. He rose to his full six feet four inches to greet Scott.

"The 'man of many talents', I think Newsweek called you", David Burnside said, extending his hand. "They said it was under your direction that tort reform began in Florida. Got '*Little John*' elected. That's what we called him in the Marines."

"Those writers were much too kind," Scott demurred. He ordered a Beefeater martini. Burnside already had a drink.

"Thanks for seeing me on such short notice."

"Japan. You've stumbled onto some sort of illegal trade group. Tell me about it."

"I'll start at the beginning," Scott said. An African Gray exotically perched in the bushes began to screech as he gave the CIA deputy director an overview of his trade formula.

"I've not eaten since breakfast," Scott broke off, tipping the menu. Burnside nodded understandingly. Scott passed the wine list. "Please choose. I'm ready for something new."

The waiter moved to their table as Burnside drained his glass. "Another round," Scott pointed. When the cocktails arrived they ordered dinner, Burnside calling for a cabernet that Scott didn't recognize. Scott returned to his account.

"I believe the Japanese practice a comprehensive, silent, subsidy of export trade. I mentioned to Governor Billings that I planned to visit Japan, and he suggested I talk to you first, to see if you might be investigating along similar lines."

Burnside paused over his drink so long that Scott wondered if he would respond. At last he spoke. "The Commerce Department suggested such a scheme might exist, but our investigation didn't reveal anything of the magnitude you suggest. We traced abnormalities with one or two Japanese companies and turned the data over to Commerce. I won't discuss findings; however, we've dropped our investigation."

Scott leaned forward "What I have may fill in some gaps." He provided more of his trip to Toronto and of Tori's cousin and the stolen transcripts.

Burnside was frowning after Scott finished his story. After a pause he admitted, "Our investigation may have gone a little deeper than I initially indicated."

"Can you be more specific?" Scott asked bluntly, paying tacit tribute to Burnside's negotiating skill.

"That's classified. However, if you go to Japan and find information I can act upon, I'm prepared to listen."

"I'll be more forthcoming as well," Scott bargained candidly. "I have reason to believe the surveillance room is still recording information from this secret *shakai*, using state of the art listening devices. At the very least, you may have an interest in the technology."

Burnside smiled. "What do you want from me?"

"Japan is the largest supplier of computers to the United States. DoorWays Corporation would like to have their multi-tasking software pre-installed in Japan, before the computers are shipped. As a director of the company I can justify a business trip. But, to hunt down this secret *shakai*, - the real reason for my going - I need to take my friend with the contacts. They're hunting him now, and they almost killed us less than eight hours ago. I need identification papers for a Japanese-American under another name." "The Agency doesn't provide resources to private individuals."

Scott reached for the wine bottle as Burnside finished his glass. "I've had enough," the CIA man said, placing his hand over his glass. They ordered coffee and Burnside asked for key lime pie.

"Where are you going to look?" Burnside asked at last.

Scott felt the interest. "With Tori's aunt and uncle. We need to find that surveillance room."

Burnside leaned back in his white, wrought-iron chair. "I won't commit resources. But I can arrange a new identification and background for your friend."

Scott remained silent, though he felt a wave of relief wash through him. Burnside wrote down a name and phone number. "Call tomorrow morning after 8:00, and a man will give you an address in the old part of town. He should be able to do the job right away. He won't be CIA, so don't mention this meeting. And don't pay him; he owes us a favor."

"I understand. Your help ...didn't happen."

"I hate amateurs," Burnside said agreeably. "But my gut tells me to go with you." He rose, hand extended across the table. "I must go. Good luck."

* * * * *

It was almost 8:00 p.m. when Scott passed through the heavy brass doors of the Watergate Hotel. The chase, Sachi's death, McShane's wounding were all a bad dream, he reflected wearily as he headed for the shower. He then noticed Ken's note on the coffee table of the large suite; he and Tori were having a drink in the downstairs lounge. His brother and airplane had arrived.

Scott found them in a booth near the bar, flirting with two attractive waitresses. Tori, a thirty-something cutting edge director, and Ken, a recently divorced pilot of forty were both magnets for fun-loving women. "Sorry I cramped your style," Scott said as the two waitresses recalling duty, disappeared. He was thankful the booth softened the lounge's blaring music.

"They'll be back," Tori said winking at Ken. Scott was glad to see that Tori seemed to have recovered much of his customary ebullience.

"I'm still waiting for Tori to finish his story," Ken said eagerly. He resembled his brother, clearly intelligent with a dazzling smile and bright blue eyes.

Scott gazed at Tori, incredulous and exasperated. "How many people have you told today?"

Tori's eyes grew large. His jaw dropped sheepishly. "He's the only one. He's your brother, I thought ...I assumed it would be okay."

"I trust Ken with my life, but please, use judgment. On a need to know basis only. All right ...finish the story."

Ken listened intently. When Tori had finished, he exclaimed: "That's incredible. What did Kate say about your experience?" He knew how Kate feared guns.

"She doesn't know and I want it to stay that way. In fact, no one should know about this except us and Neil. He's already involved," Scott cautioned.

"Agreed," Tori said. "How did your meetings go?"

"Very well. How would you like to work for a computer software company and take a business trip to Japan?"

"You've got yourself an employee," Tori said enthusiastically. "What can I do?"

"I've made a contact with someone who can give you a new identity. Not CIA, but I think the ties are pretty close. They'll take your picture tomorrow for a passport and driver's license. You'll need a haircut."

"A haircut?" Tori exclaimed. "Forget it."

"That ponytail has got to go," Scott insisted. "They know what you look like. You've got to blend in in Japan."

"God," Tori sighed. "Okay, I'll do it."

"What was the Commerce Department's guy's reaction to your formula, bro?" Ken asked.

"He was excited. He said it could break down Japanese determination."

"Then he sees the world adopting your formula?" Ken jibed, raising an affectionately skeptical eyebrow.

"Not really. Dumped manufactured product forces prices down and consumers like that. Most countries are beneficiaries of inefficient pricing, because they aren't diversified manufacturing economies. They won't vote for it. But..."

"Yeah?" Ken encouraged.

"Levens said the G-7 countries would love it, and will probably consider adopting it for trade with each other," Scott said, unable to dissemble his enthusiasm and pride.

"Except Japan," Tori said solemnly.

"Their consumers will love it," Scott retorted.

"Looks like you're going to be world-famous, bro," Ken smiled proudly. "Couldn't happen to a more deserving guy."

Scott waved an impatient hand. "We've got a long way to go," he said seriously, locking eyes with Tori, still solemn. "A long way before we're safe. All the way to Japan - and back."

- Chapter 8 -

Tokyo

Saturday, April 25

"Important call for Mr. Mashita. Does anyone know if he's still up?" The communications room manager announced to the near-empty room. He glanced at the large round clock hanging on the wall - 9:45 p.m.

The *sempai* monitoring Morita's room replied, "He's in the sempai's quarters. He asked me to call when the *shujin* completed the last of his talks."

"Thank you," the manager said, pushing a button on the phone connecting him to the sempai's quarters less than a hundred feet away. His station provided a good vantage point from which to oversee the twenty-five workstations spread along a continuous countertop around the walls of the long, narrow room. Each *kohai's* name was engraved on a sign of plastic laminate, bracketed on the wall in front of each workstation.

Headphones and a row of switches allowed the surveillance operator to record events from each room, on the small electronic recorder built into each station.

Two minutes later Mashita pushed through the door and sat at an unattended workstation, signaling the room manager to transfer the call. Mashita made a mental calculation when he heard Yakata's voice from Toronto. They were fourteen hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time, less one hour because America changes time in the summer - 8:45 a.m.

"We've traced a Visa authorization of Mr. Tahashi's to the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C. We have agents in the area who should be there shortly. I'll be on the next flight to Dulles."

"When was Mr. Tahashi in Washington?" Mashita asked.

"Last evening. Almost eleven hours ago."

"Tahashi could be long gone!" Mashita's voice rose.

"My apologies. We have only a few agents in the Canadian banking system and they work in other areas. I take full responsibility."

"Find him. He must be stopped at all costs," Mashita added in a controlled deliberate voice, "Anticipate, Mr. Yakata. You've become soft from years of industrial espionage. You are a warrior. You must seek out and destroy your enemy before he destroys you." Mashita banged the receiver down harder than he had intended. He moved to the workstation marked *Machiaishitsu*: "Holding Room." "Is it quiet in there?" "Not a sound," the sempai manning the headset answered.

"They have much to consider," Mashita chuckled. "How many more to go?"

"Only three," the sempai pointed to the three stations being monitored.

Mashita scanned the names. Nozaki. Satoshi. Morita. "Briefing in two hours?" he asked the supervisor.

"A little less. I'll sound the alarm."

"I'll get some rest. There's more to be done tonight."

* * * * *

Scott wakened early, ordered breakfast, and phoned the number Burnside had given him promptly at eight o'clock. He scribbled directions to a second floor walkup above a laundromat, making the appointment for ten o'clock, to allow time for Tori's hair-cut. Ken would take their bags to the aircraft, get weather, file a flight plan and wait.

* * * * *

Three hours later, Scott relaxed as he always did in the left seat. He leveled off at their assigned altitude of 10,500 feet on a VFR flight plan to Fort Myers, Florida, making small adjustments to the auto-pilot. Ken sat in the copilot position. Tori, newly shorn sprawled in the back seat with three submarine sandwiches and a six pack of soda.

"Ken, meet Ben Tomori," Scott said mischievously. "He was born in Chicago, and until recently, worked for Microsoft in their marketing department. He's just joined DoorWays, and going to Tokyo to sell software."

"Pleased to meet you, Ben," Ken said. "Throw me a sandwich, would you?"

"I feel invincible with this new identity," Tori replied brashly, passing drinks and sandwiches to the front seats. "It was like a scene from a B movie. A tall, thin, bearded man with unkempt hair, taking my picture and thumb print in a small upstairs flat with exposed heating pipes. It was a trip."

"What's next?" Ken asked.

"Tori needs an education from Barbara Sealy," Scott answered.

"Who's Barbara Sealy?" Tori asked.

"You'll be great friends by the time this week is over," Scott assured him. "She's the president of DoorWays, and she's going to teach you how the software works."

"Are you serious?" Tori asked, dismayed.

"You've got to pass as an executive ready to do business when we land in Tokyo. I don't want our cover blown."

The radio crackled. "November niner zero two. You're entering Orlando airspace, maintain heading, contact Miami center on one three two decimal six five."

"Roger, November niner zero two, contact Miami center, one three two decimal six five," Scott repeated.

Scott was about five miles out of Page Field, descending out of four thousand feet when a thought occurred to his restless, cautious mind. He nudged his brother. "Aircraft is yours." Scott turned to the back seat. "Tori, did you use your credit card last night?"

Tori at once looked guilty. "I charged the bar bill."

"Shit," Scott muttered. "At least the rooms weren't in your name. Did you and Ken do anything memorable to the waitresses - and did you use your card?" Scott asked Ken.

"Nothing 'memorable'," Ken said, winking at Tori. "I didn't use my card - I charged dinner to your room."

"I don't know whether to be glad or to belt you," Scott growled. "Tori, go through your wallet and pull out your credit cards, Canadian money, driver's license, everything with your name on it. Stick it in my briefcase. I'll give you U.S. dollars to use until you get your first paycheck."

Scott took control before turning final, barely a mile from the end of the runway. But then, taking control came as naturally to Scott as breathing.

- Chapter 9 -

Tokyo

Saturday April 25

Fifteen minutes after Mashita left the communications room, Togai Ashida checked the time. Ten o'clock. He smiled, proud, watching his kohai hold his own against the six sempai who had challenged him for the past hour. Akio Morita seemed calm, making the sempai's job of getting under his skin that much more difficult. Ashida had been a friend of Morita's family for more than thirty years, and he had watched him grow into a determined young man. A healthy specimen too, at five feet nine and medium build. Ashida at fifty-six had been a member of the Kani since age twenty-three, and now held a senior position at the Ministry of Social Services.

"Most honorable sempai," Ashida announced to the six men. "Mr. Morita must leave for his meeting with the Shujin. You are welcome to continue your questions when he returns." As the last sempai left the room Ashida said, "We're alone. Remove your *mekakushi* and straighten your tie."

Morita smoothed his white shirt under his belt and combed his hair. "I'm ready."

"Follow me," Ashida said. Morita slipped the *mekakushi* over his eyes once more and put his right hand on his *sempai's* shoulder.

"We're going to meet the Shujin," he added stepping into the hallway and turning right. Ashida had walked the two parallel hallways with cross connecting corridors for years, but he still enjoyed looking at the vibrant colors of the long narrow murals hanging on the walls, depicting the Kani's ancient history of warriors in action. Small tables placed along the wall every ten feet between each kohai's door, allowed the sempai to set down a drink or extinguish a cigarette.

A hundred feet down the hall Ashida turned left for fifteen feet, then turned right again, down another hallway for about eighty feet. Just before the hallway's end a connecting corridor appeared on the right, floored in dirt and pebbles, partially covered with leaves and twigs. "We're turning onto a path. Watch your step," he advised. This section of hallway was painted dark brown, with lights dimmed and fresh-cut tree branches strategically placed to brush against the kohai. They traveled fifteen feet before turning right on the dirt path, for the final five feet.

Ashida smiled, knowing how confusing this was to the masked kohai, as each time a different route could be taken to arrive at the same place. Returning, they would follow

the original steps taken, so the kohai would not recognize the deception. This time it would be different.

* * * * *

Akio Morita, the second of four boys, athletic, student of the martial arts had studied hard; but it was through his father's influence that he had been accepted at Tokyo University where he had concentrated in International Finance. He had graduated with honors and was now one of the chief currency traders for the Bank of Japan. He had felt the excitement of indirectly affecting masses of people through his trading; but, for now, his life was being controlled by others.

Morita guessed from prior weekends that he was in the basement of a large building, but he had no idea where, or what it looked like. This time they hadn't descended or climbed a stairwell, but they had traveled a considerable distance. He remembered each turn and knew they had not doubled back.

Morita heard his sempai, Ashida, knock on a heavy wooden door and his whispered exchange with someone behind. About a minute later Morita guessed, the door opened. "Enter," a voice commanded. He followed Ashida about ten feet into the room. He felt the earth under his feet and inhaled dank air. Ashida forced his right arm down to his side. "Kneel, there's a pillow at your feet," Ashida whispered in his ear.

Morita knelt on the pillow and heard the familiar words: "*No oi wo toru*," coming from a voice in front of him. Ashida removed the mekakushi from his eyes, from behind. Morita's eyes adjusted to the darkened room before seeing the Shujin, the master, sitting on a throne. The "room" was a cave hewn from rock. Candlelight flickered on the low ceiling and walls, showing the Shujin in an alcove at the end of the cave. The ceiling rose to barely six feet where Morita knelt. The Shujin looked like an ancient high priest, dressed in black robes with silver piping and chest armor from the twelfth century. His mask was adorned with jewels that resembled the face of a kani, a crab. Claws emerged from the mask's cheeks, converging near the mouth with diamond eyes that glittered in the low light from the several flickering candles.

Morita took a deep breath, sucking in the musty aroma that chilled him to the bone. His eyes took in the gauntlet of six warriors on each side, sitting cross-legged between him and the Shujin. They wore long dark robes under body armor, with executioner's hoods over their faces; two handled samurai swords rested on their crossed legs. The Shujin spoke in an ancient dialect that Morita didn't understand, but one phrase he recognized, "*itsumo de katsu*," "always win". In unison the warriors replied in the same dialect. "Mr. Morita," The Shujin broke to contemporary speech. "In front of these witnesses you have accepted the ways of the Kani. You know its penalties."

The Shujin pointed to a large crab lying between them, illuminated by a beam of red light. "You have begun to understand the power of the Kani, the responsibility that transcends the individual. You'll soon learn how to call upon this power, as you may one day be called to fight the enemies of the Empire."

Morita saw the red light shrink to a small circle and move to the crab's claw. He saw a smaller crab caught in the claw. Crushed. Killed.

The light snapped off. Morita's gaze returned to the Shujin.

"Are you comfortable without your mekakushi, Mr. Morita?" the Shujin asked.

"Yes," Morita stammered. He knew he had heard that voice in the outside world. But whose was it?

"If you could see our faces, you would recognize that we are the cornerstone of economic and political life. But there is purpose to our concealment, Mr. Morita. Do you understand why you remain behind the mekakushi?"

This was a change, Morita thought in consternation. The Shujin taught lessons, and questions came later when the sempai visited his room. The Shujin had not summoned dialogue before. "Shujin, I'm fortunate to have been challenged by the sempai on this very question. The darkness symbolizes my lack of knowledge, and helps me to think without distraction."

"That's a beginning," the Shujin said tolerantly. "The mask allows you to concentrate, to isolate facts from feelings, to ignore the prejudices vision foists upon you. Think deeply on this issue, Mr. Morita."

"The Empire has gained its strength, its stability from roots buried deep in the rock on this island. The Kani will help your roots grow equally deep. For generations the Kani have controlled our destiny through the wisdom of great philosophers and warriors. It is our obligation to pass on this vision. You have been chosen to continue this important work."

"The Kani's secret must remain hidden until your spirit rises from the fire. If you fail to protect the Kani, we shall know it. You have given us your word you will protect the Kani and your fellow kohai."

"However, it saddens me to inform that our pledge has been broken. We know the breach does not involve you, but I must inquire. Do you have knowledge of any kohai breaking this sacred trust?"

"No, Shujin." Morita hesitated. He had heard two kohai talking in the mountains, but he wasn't sure their conversation had constituted a violation. "I have no knowledge that the Kani's secrets have been betrayed."

"Your word is good," the Shujin said. "But remember, your obligation to protect the Kani must be observed. If you think of something, speak with your sempai.

"*De ou,*" the Shujin dismissed. Ashida slipped the mask over Morita's eyes once more. Morita followed his sempai, hand on his shoulder as always. Mentally he charted his progress back to his room, confident that he knew the way. Therefore he was puzzled when Ashida stopped. "Is something wrong?" Morita queried as they entered the room.

"What?" Ashida asked, slipping off Morita's mask.

Morita scanned the room. He recognized his cup sitting on the end table with the same distinctive marks on its surface; his shaving kit on its customary shelf in the closet; his suit and fresh shirt hanging where he had left them. "Nothing," he retracted, bewildered. He knew they'd returned from the Shujin by the same route; but the last corridor had been at least fifty feet shorter. He had expected to find himself in a different room. But it was his habitual cell. Was he losing his mind?

"I'll see that you're undisturbed while I attend a meeting," Ashida said, writing a note. "I'll post this outside the door."

* * * * *

Ashida snickered as he moved into the hallway. The sempai had moved Morita's room's contents while they visited the Shujin, and Morita's name plate had been switched to a new workstation in the communication room. Ashida planned only one such switch, as Morita would now be more aware of small details, like marks on the floor tiles. But it was one more psychological twist, chipping away at the kohai's confidence; a small but important step to breaking down his defenses. Two sempai approached. Ashida explained his requirements as he crumpled the note, dropping it into the waste can beside the hall table.

The first sempai entered the room. "Where's your mekakushi, kohai?" he rebuked Morita.

Morita pulled the mask down from its position on his forehead, as a second sempai asked the first if he might enter the room.

"The kohai is finally behind his mask," the man replied with an edge to his voice. Ashida silently followed the second sempai into the room. He sat by the door, letting it close with a bang.

"What did you interpret from your meeting with the Shujin?" the first sempai asked.

"What do you mean?" Morita asked, not wishing to volunteer the content of that private meeting with the Shujin.

"Mr. Morita, some of the sempai were unconvinced that the Shujin should have even talked with you, but we supported your case. The Shujin spoke to only a few kohai, those we were sure of. We know he talked about our sacred trust, and your responsibility."

"Do you know what that means, Mr. Morita?" the second sempai asked.

Morita paused. Were they trying to get him talking about something he shouldn't?

"Come now, Mr. Morita," the first sempai said impatiently. "Don't you trust your senses? You know what we're talking about. Would you kill for the Kani?" he demanded suddenly.

Morita felt disoriented. He'd been awake since 6:00 a.m. Friday; it must be late Saturday or early Sunday by now. He wasn't sure of much, except his commitment. "Yes. Without hesitation, I would kill."

"How would you kill? You know karate, but do you have the required discipline to kill?" the first sempai pressed.

"I have the discipline and the skill," Morita asserted bravely.

"I don't think so," the second sempai sneered. "You're in finance, trading money, an accountant. What makes you think you have the stomach for it?"

"Another one?" the first sempai's voice dripped with disdain. "I don't recall being told he was an accountant. We've got too many of them already. We need warriors, not accountants. The economy needs production, not sponges."

"I have the skill. I have the commitment," Morita said, even more forcefully.

The door crashed open. Two more sempai entered the room. "This kohai, this accountant, claims he'd kill for the Kani. We don't believe it," the second sempai announced to the room.

"Is this true? Are you another accountant?" the third sempai taunted Morita.

"I've never known an accountant to take a risk, to take initiative," the fourth sempai said scathingly.

"Do you take initiative, Mr. Morita? Do you take risks? If the Kani were in danger, would you be prepared to take action?"

"I think not," the second sempai judged. "He'd probably consider it for a while, then call a meeting. Soon the chance would have passed him by. The Kani would be exposed."

Ashida smiled and silently gave a thumbs up to the sempai as he slipped, undetected by Morita, out the door. It would be a long session for Morita.

Author's Note

Thank you for reading this work, combining a story of fiction with economic reality. If you enjoyed it, would you be kind enough to purchase a copy at your favorite eBook retailer.

I am also happy to hear from readers and welcome your comments on our commentary/blog section.

The second edition is not yet in print, and I do not advise purchasing a used copy of the first edition published in 1996. You will be disappointed. The publisher published only two books before going bankrupt, and the errors in the first edition of *The Level Playing Field* could explain why. I wrote the novel in word, yet they said they were not able to convert it to their publishing methodology. That should have been big clue, but excited to have the novel finished so I could get back to my regular job/work, I didn't see it. They retyped the manuscript and it is full of errors, as well as one character having two different names in several chapters. Confusing and unprofessional.

Once the first edition was released it was carried at the Fort Myers, Florida, Barnes & Noble bookstore, and the author turned his focus back to family and work. Shortly thereafter, the publisher went bankrupt.

I recently retired and have put my focus back to the *Level Playing Field*, noting that our trade policies have not changed in the last several decades. I believe it's time to adopt the *Level Playing Field* formula as a starting point for trade negotiations, and given the current political and foreign trade environment, this formula should be timely.

Thank you,

John Kingston