

Dissonance

by Vasileios Kalampakas

May 18, 2012

two science fiction short stories

Copyright © 2012 Vasileios Kalampakas

Necessity

Sousuke pulled down his visor. A freezing gust of wind buffeted against his face suddenly; it made him swivel around like someone had slapped him; he lost his balance and fell on his back. Fresh powdery snow went up in a small silver cloud around him. Fresh snow in Greenland.

Bjorn laughed with hands crossed over his chest and a carefully constructed grin on his face. He helped Sousuke back on his feet and started walking towards the crawler, shaking his head.

Half-way there he paused to pick up the surveyor unit; he brushed some snow off his beard, powered down the panel, folded the telescopic legs and placed the very expensive piece of equipment across his shoulders. Bjorn worked as a lumberjack before he signed up for this one, back when Hemmaldalen was still green.

He ventured a glimpse at Sousuke; he was struggling to walk upwind; Bjorn shook his head once more, and chuckled. He couldn't for the life of him, understand what made a guy like Sousuke take this job. He knew his geology stuff, but

other than that.. Everyday seemed like his first day.

Everyone laughed at the new guy, that much was to be expected. The psychologists on the evaluation team always noted it was a sign of good mental health. A few practical jokes and a some seriously bad efforts at humor were the order of the day at seventy-four degrees latitude.

Except Sousuke had been stationed in Field Zeta for three years, without rotation. It hadn't grown on him; it had made him sick. But somehow he never asked to transfer out; he didn't complain.

Three weeks of leave each year, and that was it. That was his lifeline with the world that despite the climate change and the Disconnect of '33 and the Big Melt of '35, still had beautiful warm beaches filled with young girls in miniscule bikinis. Even in Hokkaido in November.

Three hours by helicopter to Spitsbergen, then a four-hour flight to Murmansk to the Roskosmos SSTO. From there on, it was a three-hour suborbital flight to almost any place on Earth. And still, when it came time to buy that ticket, he always flew to Sapporo. He somehow always wanted to see the half-sunken family house at Nemuro, the cherry treetops grazing the sea surface like dead corals. He tried to remember what the blossoms looked like; a faint memory of a fragrant smell came up instead. And bees. He remembered their sound.

He must've been woolgathering there for a moment; Bjorn was shouting at him to move on. He put on his best effort at a smile and gave a thumbs up to Bjorn.

He wished there was some other way to go about it, but he had committed himself. Everything was going to change, soon enough. For the better. He shouldn't worry too much though; he would do his part and then they would either fail

or succeed.

There could be no middle ground, no chance at negotiating or talking things over once it went down. Not even if they wanted to. No failsafe, no human factor. Except himself, of course. And Joussef, Jun, and Richard. They'd all do their part.

Bjorn shouted at him again from the relative comfort of the crawler, a lit smoke already in hand:

“Don’t just stand there! Come on! Checkpoints, more checkpoints!”

For a reason that was wholly above and beyond Sousuke’s understanding, Bjorn seemed to relish in the job of running around in a snow crawler in the undecided day or night of the Arctic, searching almost blindly for thorium deposits in a faceless white desert.

Perhaps it was the rush of discovery, or the associated finder’s fee. Perhaps it was just Bjorn being Norwegian. Robots might have been able to do the job better, cheaper, and a whole lot warmer for any humans involved in the process. But they couldn’t be trusted; not like regular folk itching for a chance to live the life. Anything that could transmit and receive couldn’t be trusted these days. The Disconnect had made sure of that.

Sousuke jumped inside the crawler, closed the door behind him, reached for his thermo and poured a cup of almost scalding hot tea. He didn’t sip, he just held on to it for warmth. Bjorn started the engine and focused his attention on the control panel, waiting for the ‘Engine Ready’ sign to light up.

He drew a puff from his cigarette and offered Sousuke one, purely from habit. Sousuke shook his head, still wearing the heavy fur-lined hood: real fur, an overpriced luxury, never

mind banned by the UN, or what it had lately voted to call itself the Earth Coalition. As if the name ‘United Nations’ somehow offended the Big Three.

Sousuke relaxed a bit into his seat, stretching his legs. The cabin of the crawler was spacious, but spartan. He’d turned an empty display socket into a small sort of basket. There was a small nook somewhere in the plastic that doubled as a cup holder. Sousuke placed the cup there and closed his eyes for a moment. The engine revved up suddenly, making the crawler lurch forward like a startled beast. The tea spilled; Sousuke looked at Bjorn who simply shrugged and drove on through the snow.

“There’s more where that came from, no?” Bjorn said with a mischievous grin.

“You could have asked,” replied Sousuke tersely. Bjorn retorted in an equally dry manner, “You could have offered me some.”

“I thought you didn’t like tea,” said Sousuke with a frown.

“Still,” came the bleak answer.

Stan passed on the borsht and instead made his way to the pantry. His wrinkled nose gave away the fact that the smell put him off. Sergei shrugged and dug in heartily, though rather noisily. Miki and Elaine were sitting at one table, playing a rather convoluted version of chess, involving dice and an imaginary toroidal chessboard. It hadn’t caught on with the rest.

They were heavily absorbed, and didn’t take notice of Stan nibbling away at their snacks. Souvenirs’ from a trip southside: goat’s cheese and garlic bread from France; smoked salmon from Finland. They didn’t even take notice when Stan sat down next to them, pretending to watch while

stuffing himself shamelessly.

Bjorn entered the small but comfy mess room, all red-faced and smiling. Sousuke followed close behind, his thermo in hand and a more than usually sore look on his face. Stan had the courtesy to swallow before asking:

“What’s with Takahashi?”

Bjorn gave a shrug and made his way to the toilet, while Sousuke simply ignored Stan and vanished inside the small kitchen. Stan downed another bite of cheese before talking to practically none other than himself:

“What’s with everyone? Not enough snow? Too much white in your day? What is it this time?”

Sergei looked up from his meal, opted to pitch in by shrugging and happily continued sipping his soup.

“I spilled his tea!” came Bjorn’s muffled shout from the toilet.

“All of it?”, asked Stan leaning back on his chair. Elaine momentarily raised her head searching for the source of the small raucus, but gave no sign it was about to ruin her game. Miki took Elaine’s knight, smiled and announced her victory:

“Checkmate.”

Elaine took a moment to look at the chessboard like it had grown legs. Befuddled, she asked rather haplessly:

“No? No way out? If I..”

“No. Checkmate,” repeated Miki, barely shaking her head. She then turned to Stan with a frown:

“Did you eat all the cheese?”

Stan licked his lips and looked at the ceiling mischievously. Elaine buried her face in her palms, her voice barely audible:

“Merdre.. Three times in a row.”

Bjorn came out of the toilet with his work suit unzipped,

hanging around his waist like a peeled banana. A lot of sarcasm but just a hint of genuine concern went into his question:

“Isn’t it strange that a quarter of the world’s thorium stock relies on a bunch of geeks with a lot of time, a lot of money, and very little in the way of spending either?”

Sousuke came out of the kitchen holding a sword. An unsheathed sword.

Stan was the first one to exclaim:

“Wow! A real-life samurai. Just like in those old movies.”

They all smiled. Bjorn laughed. Sousuke did not seem to share their humourous disposition. He was looking intently at the shining metal of the blade.

“Isn’t that the antique you brought in last time? What was the name for -”

Bjorn’s sentence was cut in half, as was his throat. Jets of blood sprayed Sousuke as he moved with sharp, calculated steps.

Sergei was trying to smash through an observation pane when Sousuke’s blade severed his spine.

Stan tried to put up a fight with a shovel that happened to be lying around but his one swing never connected.

Sousuke was flawless, each move of the blade a killing blow; Stan’s head rolled off his spine like it had been fake all along.

Elaine rushed to the door only to find it locked from the inside - everyone had been too absorbed to notice. Her death wound was clean, through the heart.

Miki sat frozen still at the table, clutching at the chessboard. It happened; some animals never flee - they accept the inevitable nature of death, seeing through the falseness of their instincts.

Her evolved brain though had to know, so she asked, tears

running down her face. Amidst sobs and silent, muffled cries she managed to croak:

“Why? Whatever the reason, why?”

“Because I hate you, Miki. I hate the whole world.”

“But-”

Her voice died abruptly in her throat with a horrible gurgling sound.

It was just him now. The katana had served its purpose. He didn't know why exactly, but he felt compelled to bury the Fukushima Masamune in the snow, next to their bodies, leaving the hilt exposed. It would have to do instead of a cross. He looked at his watch; there was still ample time to start his descent to the Pit until what passed for evening at this latitude.

He sat down on a work uniform next to the sword, and crossed his legs; he breathed deeply, letting the cold inrush of air revitalize his senses. The sun's blurry orange shape somehow felt as cold as the snow. There was no warmth in that sight.

He spent a moment in reflection; he did that often but he always felt constricted, restrained as if imprisoned by a higher authority than himself. Somehow, he felt all the dead people around him made him serene, liberated. He smiled despite himself at the thought that he had almost forgotten the feeling of serenity; they irony that he had to kill five people to feel at peace was not entirely lost on him.

He remembered Miki's question then, and he somehow felt his answer had been - on retrospect - incomplete. The least he could've done was take a deep breath right then and there and tell her why he hated the world. Explain, make her understand. Maybe she could realise it wasn't personal.

He knew he didn't need some sort of validation or acceptance of what he had done, or more importantly what he was about to do. He had made up his mind, he just couldn't tell when exactly. Maybe even before he had been selected for this task. Perhaps it was when he saw his grandfather's orchard being slowly eaten away by the rising sea in just a few months.

Maybe it had been the Disconnect that had cleared up his mind. He felt it had freed him from all the digital detritus of a quietly but falsely discontent life, from all the by-products of a society hell-bent on pacing itself out of existence. It made him think. That was when he went to the temple at Sengakuji, hunting for his inner demon, his own personal *oni*.

In his search, he found out what humanity lacked: a sense of balance.

The nations had failed, time and again; the monstrously deceiving financial system couldn't sustain the boom-and-doom cycle. As a means of hoarding wealth, energy became scarce even in the developed world. Feeding on the human propensity to dream, imagine and create, the global information network slowly turned into a parasite that took root into people's hearts and minds twisting them, enslaving them, watching them.

The Disconnect changed all that. The network did not devolve or wither away; it went away with a bang. Nobody is perfectly sure why it happened. Horrible error or extreme terrorism, it nearly plunged the globe into unremitting chaos.

Every connected machine became infested. Efforts to reinstate a new network failed. No virus could be detected. Even radiation-hardened systems failed consistently. The networking infrastructure collapsed. The era of the internet had died.

Along with it came most communications, industry and finance. Anything more advanced than a radio or a pulse tone telephone was practically impossible to operate in a meaningful way. Someone had let the world slip back into its Gerns-back pajamas.

People woke up having to learn how to live anew. Sousuke remembered how distraught his father had looked to him those first few days, while his grandfather smiled wryly, watering his watermelons and reminiscing about his own childhood. ‘The only net we knew was the fishing kind’, he had said.

It wasn’t the complete catastrophe the media had predicted; those were hard times, but famine and disease did not spread like wildfire - however dependent the world had become around its gadgets and smart networked machines, a man still had his own hands to rely upon.

It was the things without faces or hands that had it worst: corporations. About to hang themselves with a rope they had pretty much made themselves, they tried to think big for a change. But only after the Big Melt.

The only measurable cause was a freak increase in solar radiation. That afact alone though, couldn’t account for almost half the Greenland ice sheet melting away in just two years. Extreme measures were put in place; weather systems went to hell. The global conglomerates offered to practically buy most nations around the Earth and in exchange provide the means to survive. Few could refuse.

The corporations invested every last iota of what remained of their resources, human and otherwise, into what became known as the ‘shift’.

Thorium-based nuclear power became a main source of electrical power production, alongside the solar forests of the

Sahara and the Great Energy Reef in the Pacific, right on top of the dying Great Barrier Reef. The Chinese having founded their Second Empire, relied on practical, sustained nuclear fusion.

Space became a real priority for the first time: the mass driver on the moon supplied Earth with cheap processed strategic minerals, while modified Soyuz tugboats hauled asteroids for exploitation near mineral refineries at the Languangian points.

The Alps had melted away, but the Himalayas made for excellent skiing. The tropics were delineated anew. Winter - for the most part - became a historic reference.

In just two decades everything had seemed to change, while it had actually remained the same.

Not to Sousuke. Not to the others like him. Joussef at Bilma, Richard at Lizard Island, Jun at Lake Nasihu. At 20:00 UTA, the world would plunge into darkness, and humanity would either truly try and evolve or die out. Just like so many species before man.

He got up and walked to the service elevator. He depressed the descent button, and watched the various strata of rock roll past him evenly, as if he was walking down the two mile shaft at an easy pace. The main generator facility was a huge natural underground cavern, carefully modified to accomodate the single largest power generation station in the world, an array of thousands of thorium reactors capable of producing energy in the scale of terawatts. Room-temperature superconductors carried it through the rock and across the ocean bed to America and Europe alike.

Africa had become completely self-sufficient due to the Sahara Solar Field, and Asia was being fed by the Chinese Empire's fusion stations. Australia and Japan relied on the

Great Barrier Reef.

Four central locations provided the world with more than enough energy.

But it wasn't free. Nothing, ever, was free. Except for their own conscience, their own spirit.

They did not expect to be lauded; far from it, there were no misconceptions on how the childish masses of the human populace would greet their vision-come-reality. There would be little in the way of assigning guilt and blame when the whole planet would be just another black spot in the night sky. When each man's reach would be as wide as any kingdom's, past or future alike.

The words of Rudi came to mind then, in that bar in Magdeburg: 'The world needs a reset button, and we will push it.' For the first time in a long while he smiled for noone to see.

The wall of the corridor was ridden with indication LEDs, a living tapestry of light. The air was stale; it had a heavy copper scent about it. The warmth from the heat exchangers was a stark contrast to the temperature at the surface. A gentle breeze flowed through the maze of valve computers. There was no victorianesque quality to them, he noticed; simply a crude lack of imagination, a persistent lack of taste.

He walked through the maze of interconnects and cabling grids. At times, he ventured a look upwards into the bleak emptiness of the cavern. There was the faintest light coming down from the ventilation shafts, a gray-blue light, its hue reminiscent of dark ice.

After a while, he reached the central distribution hub. From there, he would interfere with the neutron emission mechanism, and turn the whole grid into a giant ticking bomb.

Joussef would reorient all the reflectors in such a way as to cause them to melt down, while Jun would simply release the dam's valves over at Lake Nasihu and cause all the water to flood onto the valley. Thinking about how people in power had relied on people once again because they could be trusted smelled like poetic justice to Sousuke. He laid down his backpack near an access panel, when he heard footsteps and a metallic, clicking sound that faintly echoed barely above the low-pitched hum of the machinery.

"End of the line, Sousuke. Hands off the backpack. Just kick it towards me," said an unusually uncharacteristic voice, the voice of a man. Another pair of footsteps could be heard approaching peacefully, without hurry.

"Who are you?" asked Sousuke with genuine curiosity.

"I hate it when they try to talk their way out of it," the man said, scoffing.

"Wouldn't you?" said a female voice that somehow seemed way too familiar to Sousuke. She spoke with a heavy Japanese accent. The realisation hit Sousuke too hard, too late.

"Kaname?" he asked plainly.

"I did need to, but I wanted to see you one last time. You do realise, three similar yet much less civilized conversations are taking place elsewhere. You probably want to know why, and I do want to tell you all the reasons. Because I hate you and your kind, Sousuke. You're just kids playing with adults. It's not about money and greed, or power, whatever your idea of the world's powers might be. It's about survival. You'd wreck humanity in your neo-lutheran dream of simpler, darker days. You think we're alone out there. Would you do otherwise had you known we're not?"

She sounded accusing, but there was conviction behind

those words. They rang true to Sousuke's ears. He brought a picture of Kaname playing hide-and-seek in the cherry orchard. She always managed to surprise him. His voice carried all his feelings of pity and grief into a simple word:

"No."

"You think you were the first ones, Sousuke?" Kaname asked with a dry throat. Sousuke hesitated for a moment, then replied:

"Yes, we did.. Kaname, was all that necessary then?"

The man with the gun walked a few more paces towards Sousuke, his shoes clattering on the floor threateningly. Kaname tried to sound composed, but her voice wavered slightly:

"Would it matter, whatever my answer was?"

Sousuke managed to snort a laugh despite himself and said: "Necessity is the mother of invention."

"Ah. Famous last words?" said the man with the gun and placed the barrel against the base of Sousuke's neck.

"Just the truth. Funny how you learn to trust people."

The short silence was broken by a gunshot, only to be replaced by the repetitive hum of the circulation pumps and the shallow sound of footsteps growing ever distant.

Origami

Dan walked up the creaky wooden steps and gazed at the old house. It looked neglected, almost abandoned. He had been gone for too long.

It was springtime in Sapporo again. The air was full of a fragrant essence; cherry blossoms strewn all over the hills. A cold breeze swept down throughout the foot of Mount Teine. Dan breathed in a lungful of air and then watched as his own breath turned into nothing more than little wisps of cloud.

He smiled and stood in front of the door for a moment, searching his pockets. He found his ever peculiar-looking key and inserted into the padlock. A click and a moment later, he was pushing the door panes open, letting fresh air and the warm light of mid-morning enter.

He didn't bother with the suitcase or any of the other stuff lying around the house. There were motes of dust twirling wildly above the various packages, and an awful lot of it on the floor as well.

Dan cared little for any of those packaged household items, with one notable exception. With mischievous

sparkling eyes, he picked one out of the rest with all the joy and mirth of a kid handed a chocolate bar: the small box was labeled “Tea Kit”. Two minutes later, he was boiling water in a small kettle on top of a small gas stove. He took a moment to gaze around the large hall: a soothing feeling washed over him in the knowledge that everything was just the way he had left it.

Once the tea was ready, he poured himself a cup of and sat down on the wooden floor. For a few moments, he kept his eyes shut and simply let the aroma of green tea waft into his nostrils. It was to be expected that the tea would be stale, but he had hoped the smell would be less disenchanting. Still, it made him feel homely, attached. Such fleeting moments of peace were more than he had ever hoped for.

He couldn’t resist running his hands on the old cedar planks on the floor. They were filled with deep, rugged pores, jumbled cracks and woodwater that managed to seem almost deliberately engraved - unnatural yet familiar. The floor felt far too old to his touch, yet warm and endearing - it made Dan feel like he had grown up in this house. But that was not true.

He took a sip of tea and reminded himself this was the house where Shimaki Kensaku had been born.. At the back of his mind, he never really wanted to actually live in it. He had always thought it should belong to noone in particular. Perhaps he should have turned it into some kind of museum. Maybe next year. Or the year after that. Not yet, at any rate.

The sun was slowly dimming away behind the mountain, yet some wild sunrays bounced off the glimmering sea like flecks of sprinkled gold across his eyes. He squinted for a moment, and looked away.

Dan blinked furiously until his vision readjusted and once he could see clearly once more he was startled by the figure

of a wrinkled old man in a tweed suit, grinning widely with his hands glued to the sides.

Dan was surprised; he wasn't expecting anyone. There wasn't much of a neighborhood to speak of either. The old man didn't even let him ponder about all that; he bowed smartly. The overall effect of a courteous fellow was only slightly marred by his japanese accent. It was english though, still:

"Good evening, Mr. Teanbet. My name is Jun Kurawa. How do you do?"

He offered a handshake, all the while grinning profusely. The man struck Dan as vaguely familiar, in the way that most men his age looked about the same. He gave him a nod instead and motioned with his hand for the man to sit down, waving the handshake away with his implant.

Dan pointed at the kettle and his cup of tea; the spare cup in the tea kit had proven useful more than once. The gentleman in the proverbially out-of-fashion tweed suit accepted happily. He bowed more deeply, sat down with graceful ease and took the cup of tea in both hands. He sipped politely but didn't seem to enjoy the aroma.

"Thank you, Mr. Teanbet. I am honored to set foot in this house. If I would be so bold, I need to ask of you a small favor."

That was a first in Dan's four years of living in Japan. A complete stranger asking him for a favor without a hint of shame, barely moments after introducing himself. It genuinely aroused his interest.

"Well, I'm all ears. It's just that I've been away for six months, and suddenly.."

Dan didn't have a chance to finish: the nice gentleman interrupted him with a reassuring smile, followed by another

sip of tea. He spoke with an assurance stemming from God knows where.

“We know, Mr. Teanbet. We know. Good tea. We’ve been expecting you.”

“You have? That’s gyokuro, by the way,” said Dan pointing at Mr. Kurawa’s cup. He was frowning when he offered somewhat apologetically:

“Might be a bit stale after all these months. And who are you be representing then, exactly, Mr. Kurawa? I’ve only been here five minutes and you’re knocking on my door.”

Mr. Kurawa cleared his throat before announcing in what must have been his best effort at an officious tone:

“The Kaisei elementary school. We were hoping you might allow our students to visit.”

Dan planted his palms on the floor and laid back for a moment. All of a sudden he was having second thoughts about his hearing implants. He repeated himself rather lamely:

“Visit? From the students? I’m sorry, but what for?”

Mr. Kurawa furrowed his brow, finally showing a bit of discomfort. Or perhaps he simply found the question ignorant, considering the owner of the House of the Blossom should know that.

“Well, this is the birthplace of Shimaki Kensaku. It is a great landmark, a piece of Sapporo history, still standing. Children at least should have the opportunity to visit. Touch. See. Smell.”

Dan gave it a moment’s thought. It was pretty much along what he had been thinking - like a museum of sorts. He couldn’t for the life of him understand what schoolchildren could find interesting or exciting about it though. He remembered endlessly boring schooltrips. He smiled thinly: he felt he had found his own spot in the never-ending circle of irony.

He pointed at a heap of packages, still shrink-wrapped airtight and said to Mr. Kurawa, leaning slightly in front:

“Well, I can see the value in it. Why not? Let’s talk about a schedule or something after I -”

“Thank you, Mr. Teanbet!” the old man exclaimed with a burning smile across his face. Then he said something in Japanese that to Dan sounded more like a growling series of curse-words. He hadn’t really managed to keep up with the language. While he was trying to sort out what the venerable teacher had said, he was staring at what was probably the whole class of children. Uniformed, standing upright, tightly and neatly arranged in rows and columns like toy soldiers, they looked like they had been drilled to death just for this day. Then he heard thin, child-like voices shouting on the top of their lungs:

“Doumo arigatou gozaimashita!”

Dan knew then they were thanking him. He just didn’t know the real reason why.

* * *

The drive up to the house was a quick ten-minute ride, most of it a series of turns. Springtime had set in fully by now; every tree was in full bloom and the harsh sunrays were mellow and warm. Dan was sitting behind the wheels, and felt he could actually taste the sun. That’s why he kept trying to catch the rays with an open mouth, laughing all by himself.

It was a Monday. One of those Mondays when you just look at the world outside your window and instantly become enthralled; when you just take off, and go fishing. When you just feel like ten years old, sitting on a bench having ice-cream, bathing in the sun like school’s out and is never in

session, ever again. The kind of day the world could burn for all you care.

When he arrived at the house, he noticed a school van parked outside. They were at it again; he really wasn't bothered, he'd told Mr. Kurawa. But he had insisted he would allow the kids to bother him, asking all sorts of questions. That was a teacher's job, he had said proudly.

He admired that in the Japanese; not their multiple forms and ways of being polite, or their cherished, twisted form of samurai pride in a world wholly alien to noble notions. He admired their dependable character.

They came in the morning school hours. He'd given Mr. Kurawa the keys, and would ring him whenever he'd be out for more than a couple of hours. Nothing ever went missing, and everything was always in place. For all he knew, they hadn't even stepped one foot inside.

He parked the sportster right beside the van, and gazed at the house. A canvas of sunlight graced the front porch; the gently swaying trees cast small patterns of soft shadow. When the kids left, Dan thought to himself, he'd have some tea outside. Maybe this time Mr. Kurawa could be persuaded to join.

As he walked up the stairs, he was a bit surprised to see all the windows were closed shut, the inside of the house filled with shadows. Motes of dust tumbled lazily in front of the open door. It was as if the house was empty; as if it had been boarded up and left to rot for days. A strong, uneven smell of sweetness assaulted him suddenly. It reminded him of sugar burning in a pan. Cooking? That would be a first, Dan thought.

He took a few more steps and stood right under the doorway. He was barely able to make the outline of the staircase

leading to the upper floor. What on earth were they doing? Film screening? And where was everyone? These thoughts kept going around in circles, as the smell grew stronger and pungent. It wasn't like caramel anymore; it reminded him of vomit.

"Hello? Mr. Kurawa? Are you here? What's going on?" Dan said, loud enough to be heard on the other floor as well. No answer came back. No sound other than the whistling of the trees. The wind was picking up outside.

Dan took two steps inside. Instinct and a rising sense of worry turned his every step in a complicated matter; as if his legs were made of stone and he had just learned to walk. He hadn't felt this silly since high-school, but something in the back of his mind told him this really wasn't just a prank kids would pull. Dependable, Japanese school-children didn't do pranks. Not of this sort. He shouted once more:

"Hey, Mr. Kurawa. Just, show up. Light on now, OK?"

Again, no answer. No movement, no light. The darkness in front of him was so total, the sun seemed to shy away from it right at the door. As if it could go no more. Then Dan heard the creaking of the door and a swooshing sound as it closed shut right behind him. He turned around instinctively and almost lost his footing. He fumbled for the door handle, trying to pull it open again.

As did most Japanese, Dan prided himself a peaceful man. Despite that half-truth, and despite his past experiences, he felt the anger inside him gorge suddenly, with only that slight provocation. This game, or prank, it really shouldn't get him going like that. He should deal with it, he thought, like a responsible adult of a certain education and character:

"Fuck me! What the hell, Kurawa? Son of a bitch, this is my house dammit!"

Strangely enough, as he stood there facing the closed door, he felt the an ice-cold rush of air tingle the hair on his back, as if he was stark naked. And a sound like rocks tumbling down into a frothing river started to echo distantly. He slowly turned around and still saw nothing. For a moment he was about to erupt into a frenzy, running wild inside the house, just to feel the walls on each end.

Then a man not very much unlike Mr. Kurawa showed up, appearing from the shadows as if an invisible source of light shone at his face, which was in fact covered by a mask. Dan was startled and involuntarily took a step back. The mask seemed familiar; it was one of those used in the Kabuki theater. *This is going too far*, he thought. *The man's probably gone senile for real.*

Have I, son of the Oni?

Dan heard those words in his mind. After only a second's pause, he wished he had just *thought* he'd heard these words. The man in the mask, perhaps hopefully Mr. Kurawa and not some other nut, hadn't taken it off. He hadn't moved an inch, neither lips or limbs.

It's a recording, that's what it is. The thought sprung up inside his mind to the rescue of his sanity. Any hope of that being the truth was promptly shot down when he heard once more, in crystal clarity and with all the harmony and honey-laden softness of a fairy-tale troubadour:

Come now, Dan. I'm no recording. You're not crazy. At least, not right now.

Dan went wide-eyed and instinctively pushed the man in the mask. His hands went right through where his torso might have been. A second, flurried attempt at the man's head was equally, if not more so, disturbing. A moment of freezing terror was quickly followed by the last chance of a human

mind to comprehend; a hologram. Maybe this was all weird and fucked up, but it was still, just a hologram. And that voice? That voice's just-

That is the voice of the Origami. I'm real, Dan. As real as it gets.

And then the entire house shone brilliantly and suddenly without a flash, as if it had been so all along; like an impossible cover was pulled aside.

What Dan saw, or at least hoped he thought he was seeing in some drug-induced haze, or some virtual hypnoprospection, drove him almost past the edge of sanity into a nightmarish land he had never thought the mind was capable of dreaming up.

He saw the man in the mask, wearing Mr. Kurawa's tweed clothes, his veined and wrinkled old hands crossing each other, palms facing opposite walls. And on each wall, the heads of the children. Pale, lacking expression, as if sleeping solemnly. Trails of dark blood ran down the white walls like withered, bony branches of dead trees.

The flow of blood led to the small-framed bodies of the children still in their school uniforms; dismembered, broken, cut up like disused dolls. They had been gutted, their entrails laid out in a straight line. Like spokes in a wheel, they led to a bloody mess of a pile in the very center of the room. A pile of hearts, still beating.

His would've pulled his own eyes out if he wasn't frozen still in sheer, unthinkable horror.

The shock made Dan release his bowels involuntarily. The man in the mask threw his head backwards in a fit of audible laughter. Dan was trembling visibly, but somehow his knees didn't give way. His spine felt chilled to the bone, and all colour had left his face. He looked more like a corpse

than a man. His mind raced with just one crude, repetitive thought: “Oh, fuck. Jesus. Fuck!”

The man in the mask spoke then, not with that sweet-timbred voice in Dan’s head, but with Mr. Kurawa’s crude accent:

“Magnificent, isn’t it Mr. Teanbet? Thanks to you, of course. The Oni is pleased.”

Dan’s heart was near stopping, while his instinct of fleeing had chipped away like frail paint in stormy wind. He sat frozen, limp and unable to do anything else other than breathe in a shallow fashion. Cold perspiration ran down his forehead and back, but he didn’t register it. Kurawa, or whatever it was that called itself the Origami, went on:

“You see, Mr. Teanbet, you have been chosen. Your life’s work, your past, your..” The man seemed to struggle with the word: “..experiences. It all leads to this moment. This wonderful moment.”

The man’s mask smiled in a deathly grin, revealing two sets of kid’s teeth, half-formed and somewhat crooked, as if someone had strung them together in a necklace. Dan bent slightly forward and retched. The spasms and the cramped stomach muscles connected him to the sick reality around him.

He was looking at his feet, a small pool of vomit like a blotch of ink staining the old wooden floor. That was his bloodied vomit on the floor, but it didn’t look like blood at all. It was a pitch black ooze, sticky like tar, its surface shining with a glistening iridescence like oil. Dan didn’t feel as shocked as before. Instead, he spent a few moments simply gazing at what had come out of his stomach. He felt curious, whereas he knew he should’ve felt deathly sick, or gone instantly mad.

The thought of a species of sand-lizard that could voluntarily stop its heart came uninvited to his mind; a part of him wished he could do that just now. Another part of him felt intrigued that he would be contemplating suicide, *right about when things were starting to become interesting.*

That's not me, a naked thought rang through his mind. *Oh, but it is you. It's the new you, my son.* That voice in his mind again; only much more different. Radiant warmth seemed to embrace every word. A feeling of knowing that voice came to settle in his mind. It was someone he knew, someone he trusted. Someone he loved.

His body slackened, and he fell on his knees with a thud. The Origami stepped aside almost on cue, as if ushering Dan inside a holy house. Tears ran down Dan's chin, as the pile of hearts began to pulsate with a sickening violet light. The Origami began chanting on the top of his lungs, in a strange language full of vowels and throat sounds.

The pile of hearts turned into a mass of flesh, the aortas turning into gaping mouths for just moments, tissue folding inside out and fusing together, as if trying to remember. Remember a shape.

The chanting grew louder; it was because Dan was chanting along. His mouth moved of its own volition, spewing forth nonsense that somehow meant something to him. It was madness, he knew; a fleeting part of his sane mind told him so in writhing agony.

It was pure madness; with any luck, none of it had happened: He was still in that veteran's hospital, plugged in a nightmare of his own creation, a tailored poisonous concoction running through his veins. He'd done that before, he might've done it again. He might've just imagined being released, and all the years in between. Just as long as this wasn't

happening, as this wasn't real.

It's real, my son. All this, and the last war. The draught and the famine, the killings and the plague that followed. You, in that deep, fathomless basement. Trying to find a way to cure humanity of all its ills.

The experiments? How did the voice know? The chanting buzzed through his head like a power-drill right on his eardrum. He couldn't think, he just chanted along with an alien fervor he had never thought himself capable of.

It was as if he had been locked outside his own mind and someone had thrown away the keys, small glimpses of the past and the present mingled together, seen through a red-misted slit. In front of him, the mass of flesh took further shape; muscles and formed into back-jointed legs, the bulbous mass in the center slowly but clearly extending two fibrous webs. Wings.

The voice in his mind came as a welcome, soothing sensation. Its absence, Dan could now tell, hurt with each passing moment:

You're old self is fading away, yet you still do not recognise me. You cling on to your genetic past, while I offer your kind immortality past the flesh. It matters no more, Dan. Humanity will be no more, but it is saved. Such a small price, really.

The Origami began dancing in a swirling pattern around the bodies of the children. He swayed his hands this way and that, the mockery of a graceful ballerina; a devilish clown in a mask.

Echoes from the walls magnified the rhythmic chanting, reverberating, repeating and adding to the sound like hundreds of majestic voices singing at the wall between this world and the other, wishing for it to crumble down forever.

Dan had a sudden revelation; what little remained of his own self in that body knew know who that voice was. As the mass of flesh took the form of a winged demon, a monstrous dragon-like head appeared, eerily familiar. It was grinning impossibly wide, as if its face barely held together.

Shimaki Kensaku. It was him; he couldn't tell why or how he knew, but it was really him. Even after death, it was him. Just when the demon was fully formed in the flesh, the chanting stopped abruptly and the light in the room was extinguished as if the flame on a candle had been suddenly blown. In the darkness, Dan heard the deep voice of his lost friend and esteemed colleague, Shimaki Kensaku. It had a serrated quality about it, like a saw grinding on stone:

"It was just a name. Good as any, Dan. Remember the acceptance speech at the Swedish Academy? It was all lies of course. But you Dan, my gratitude was as real as it gets to one of your kind. I sincerely believe this wouldn't work without you. But it did."

For a precious few moments, Dan felt himself regain control of his body. He instinctively felt like running, running harder and faster than ever before. But it wouldn't do, he knew it didn't matter. He remembered the joy and awesome marvel that had been finding the mythical elixir of life - relieving humankind of the Primordial Sin. A new society, a bright, unending future. Then he remembered Kensaku's death; a gleaming fireball in the clear Parisian night. A sub-orbital reentry accident.

He wept then; not because of the memories, or the tragic truth that was revealed in front of him in such a horrific way. Because of what that implied for their work - for the species. How else did Shimaki exhibit that intuitive grasp of cell mechanics? Those papers on mitochondrial regeneration, free

root consolidation, flexible protein assembly and energy-free transcriptions?

Like they had been handed down from up above, almost overnight, the two of them offer a greedy mankind with the ultimate hassle-free solution: a life never-ending. And it worked too. He saw it worked. Everyone saw it worked. That's why every living soul on the planet had their genes fixed.

"But it does, Dan. It really does. Only it comes with a price," said the demon as his large reptile eyes shone with a dazzling ruby-red intensity. Dan's head was throbbing from the pain; he knew he just had a few more moments before his personality was utterly discarded, erased like a blackboard. His last words, he found them quite fitting:

"Go ahead and kill me, you sick fuck."

"Kill you?" said the demon in a quizzical fashion. The Origami then appeared in front of Dan, holding a small circlet; it was made of thistle and barb wire.

"I want you to rule in my name, Dan. Forever," the demon said with finality, a gray putrid tendril shooting from within its maw and crowning Dan with the circlet. The Origami took off its mask then; all that Dan could see was a cold, hard slit of a jet black eye staring back at him, boring through his soul, eating it away.

His last sense was a far-away beeping sound, that seemed to grow, and grow, and grow..

* * *

"Dan? You didn't go home? Hard night then? Oh, the sample's ready."

The beeping sound stopped. Dan opened his eyes and saw Shimaki press a button on the sequencer. The smell of

green tea broke through the thin aromatic barrier of medical alcohol and cheap odor spray. Half his face, the part resting uncomfortably on his notepad was swollen from the sleep; Shimaki looked at him, smiled and rolled his eyes.

Dan asked with a raspy, almost sore voice:

“Bad hair day?”

Shimaki simply nodded and sipped at his cup of tea before peering through another simulation log. He was preoccupied with something that seemed out of place. He was about to show it to Dan, when he heard him yawn. Some of Dan’s bones made a crackling sound when he stretched. He said then, as if to noone in particular:

“You know, I had this weird dream.”

Shimaki turned and faced him, asked him with a rather conspicuous look:

“What was it about?”

Dan yawned once more, stretched and headed for the lab’s toilet. His voice was muffled, distant:

“Can’t remember. Hey, what’s an Origami?”