

Ceramic DM – Winter 2007: Round 2, Match 1
carpedavid vs. BardStephenFox

Three, Two, One, Go

Shoji checked his watch; he didn't want to be late for his first shakedown. As he hurried down the crowded streets of Tokyo III, passing businessmen in suits and housewives in smart skirts, people gave him a wide berth. The pompadour haircut; black, leather pants; black shirt; and black, leather gloves made him look like a gangster – which, of course, he was.

After passing the Spaceport, where the whine of antigravity engines filled the air, Shoji cut through Yamamoto Square. He hurried past the hundreds of robotic solicitors that continually beamed holographic advertisements into the air in front of the thousands of tourists that passed through the center of the city each day. Finally, he dodged between the wood-paneled family sedans, growling hoverbikes, and hopped-up hot rods that sat, stopped, in the daily rush hour traffic jams, before emerging onto the sidewalk in front of Tanaka Park.

He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, so he took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. Although Ichiro, his mentor in the Green Dragon Clan, had informed him the day before that this would be an easy mark – a street performer – he wanted to make a good impression. *Think tough, Shoji*, he thought to himself. *Keep cool. Don't be a spaz.*

Shoji dashed past the ice cream stand, tilt-a-whirl, and merry-go-round before seeing his counterpart sitting slouched on a park bench. He was watching what Shoji presumed to be their mark: a woman dressed in a heavy kimono and a noh mask who was reciting her lines in time to a walking bass line that emanated from a speaker off to one side. At her feet was a golden bowl, which passers-by occasionally dropped a few newyen into.

“Hi Ichiro,” Shoji said as he crouched down next to the bench.

“What's buzzin', cousin?” Ichiro said with a slight nod. He cocked his head to one side and frowned. “Bad news, Clyde, you look like an Ivy Leaguer.”

“I'm sorry?”

“Un-tuck your shirt, man.”

Shoji grimaced inwardly, and then hurriedly rearranged his clothes.

“You've got to look cool to be in this business,” Ichiro drew out the word “cool” for several more syllables than it actually possessed. “This business is all about intimidation. You've got to make the squares believe that you're going to go ape if they don't get with it. For example, you see this nest?” he pointed to his head.

Shoji had indeed noticed Ichiro's hair – it was also a pompadour, but was easily a foot tall. He nodded. [Image 1]

“You know what this nest says to the squares we deal with every day?”

“No, not really,” Shoji said, more than a little puzzled.

“It says, ‘I don’t care that you have to pay the rent.’”

“How does it say that?”

“Because it says that I’m too cool to care about their problems,” Ichiro replied with a snort.

“What if they don’t think it’s cool?”

“They don’t have to think it’s cool. Only I have to think it’s cool. They just have to know that I know that they know that I think it’s cool.” He looked sidelong at Shoji, “Why? Don’t you think it’s cool?”

“Oh, it’s cool!” Shoji replied nervously, “Very cool. Really.”

“That’s what I thought,” Ichiro replied as he examined his own image in a small mirror that he produced from his back pocket. “You know, I can give you some pointers on getting yours to look like this. Not that it’ll be as cool as mine.”

“That would be great,” Shoji said as he forced a smile. “I...uh...don’t know if I can get mine to grow that long, though.”

“Implants.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I know a place where you can get a deal.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Here’s the word from the bird, man: you’ve got to get noticed if you want to move up in the organization,” Ichiro produced a small comb from the same pocket that he had produced the mirror, and smoothed a single stray hair back into place. “You do want to move up in the organization, don’t you?”

“Well, I’m really just doing this to save up money for college,” said Shoji, “I’d like to study hyperspace and become a jump gate engineer.”

“Ah, so you really are an Ivy Leaguer,” Ichiro frowned. “I dunno, daddy-o, Boss Takashi was hip with that, but Boss Oda’s a lot more demanding.”

Shoji grimaced. He had joined the Green Dragon Clan four months earlier, just before Boss Takashi had a heart attack. Under the fat man's rule, the worst transgression was showing up late with his double bento-box lunch. Once Oda took over, though, he demanded tribute, and failure resulted in sacrifice. More than a few members of the clan had lost their little fingers in the past three months. Shoji was now worried that he wouldn't be able to get out.

"Besides, who wants to be a square?"

"Well, my dad's a square. That's why I'm on Mars. He's a terraforming engineer for the Colonial government."

"Man, that's not a square, that's a cube. A square squared."

"Actually, a square squared is..."

"Hey, cut the gas, man, the girl's done."

Shoji looked up to see the woman take a bow and then turn around to switch off the music. She removed her heavy kimono, revealing a silk blouse and a pink poodle skirt, and then took off her mask and glanced over at the two of them.

She got a puzzled look on her face. "Shoji?"

"Mei?" Shoji groaned. Mei was Shoji's lab partner in Quantum Physics class, and they got along well enough that they had gone out for ice cream after school the previous week.

"What do you two want?"

"We're here for the Green Dragon Clan's payment," Ichiro said, stretching out his hand expectantly.

"This isn't Clan territory, this is Triad territory," said Mei as she pulled a handful of multi-hued bills out of the golden bowl.

"Well, now that Boss Oda is in charge, we're expanding our territory," Ichiro said nervously.

"Great, now I have two groups who want my money. Why don't you go out and find a real job, huh?" she said as she counted the money. "Here, ten percent," she stuck out her tongue as she handed over the newyen.

"Actually, it's fifteen percent, now," said Ichiro.

"You'll take ten and you'll be happy," Mei spat. "Besides, you should be ashamed, shaking down your little sister."

“Little sister?” Shoji gasped as he looked back and forth between Mei and Ichiro. If he ignored the hair, the resemblance was certainly there.

“Ok, baby,” Ichiro laughed uncomfortably, “don’t have a cow. We’re cool.”

“We’re cool? We’re cool?” she crossed her arms and glared at Ichiro. “Only one of us is in any way, shape, or form cool, Ichiro, and it’s certainly not you.”

“Oh, I see, so you’re the cool one?” Ichiro said as he turned his head to the side and slid his hand along the top of his hair.

“Yeah, and maybe if you spent a little more time studying and a little less time preening, you might actually get into college and do something with your life.”

“Oh. Oh. Oh. Okay, right.” His head began to bob in anger, and with the giant hair, all Shoji could think of was a rooster strutting around. “Come on Shoji, let’s blow this place,” he said as he turned and began walking away.

“Ok,” he turned to Mei, “I should go.”

Mei winked at him, “See you later, alligator.”

Caught by surprise, Shoji smiled, “After a while, crocodile.”

Shoji rode on the back of Ichiro’s hoverbike as they returned to the noodle house that served as the Green Dragon Clan’s headquarters. Located in a primarily residential district of Tokyo III, the noodle house saw significant foot traffic, but far less car traffic than the busy city center. Ichiro parked at the curb, and the two walked inside.

Patrons packed the restaurant, most wearing the same type of outfit that Ichiro and Shoji wore. They walked past the sea of pompadours and black leather pants to a room in the back where a black and white cat was curled up on the cushion of a gilded, baroque chair.

Shoji looked around, and was about to bow and introduce himself when Ichiro motioned to him to be silent. He pointed to a curtain on the other side of the room, which rippled with activity. A dun-colored pit bull emerged from behind the curtain, carrying a tray of sushi in its jaws. It walked over to the chair and set the tray down in front of the cat, then sat and wagged its tail expectantly.

The cat sniffed at the sushi and then nibbled off a corner. After a second, he began growling at the dog. The dog whimpered but sat obediently at the foot of the chair as the cat rose from the seat and stretched.

“This is maguro!” the cat said in a deep, gravelly voice as he climbed down from the chair. “I said toro! Toro is the fatty tuna, you imbecile!”

The cat swiped at the dog with its front paw, opening a gash on its nose. The dog whimpered. It swiped again, and the dog let out a cry of pain, but still sat motionless. Then, the cat jumped into the air, twisted its body, and slammed its back paw into the side of the dog’s face, sending a spray of blood and saliva into the air. [Image 4]

Oda had been Boss Takashi’s robotic cat, handed down from Boss to Boss since the inception of the Clan. He had spent over a hundred years lying in the laps of the Green Dragon’s leaders as they cut deals, ordered hits, paid bribes, and ate lunch. In addition to learning nearly everything possible about being an underworld boss, Oda had become accustomed to eating the finest raw tuna.

“Dogs really are as stupid as they look,” Oda hissed as the robotic pit bull ran out of the room. He briefly glanced at Shoji and Ichiro before hopping back up into his chair, where he curled up and lay his head on his paws. “What?”

Ichiro stepped forward, “Boss Oda, sir, we came to turn in our tribute.”

“Good, good,” the cat said as he motioned with his tail toward a giant golden urn. “You know where to put it.”

Ichiro walked across the room and dropped in the newyen. The urn hummed for a second before announcing in a pleasant, female voice, “three hundred.”

“Three hundred?” Oda lifted his head. “That’s it? Pathetic.”

“I’m sorry sir, it was our first day in the new territory,” Ichiro said as he bowed deeply.

Oda narrowed his eyes at Ichiro, “Fine – you get off easy this time. Next week it better be three thousand.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,” Ichiro said, bowing with each syllable – his hair frantically bobbing to and fro.

“You leave.” He then pointed to Shoji with his tail, “You stay.”

Ichiro stared at Shoji with wide eyes. “Sorry, daddy-o, you’re on your own,” he whispered as he dashed past him toward the main restaurant.

“I heard that you went out on your first shakedown today, Shoji.”

“Yes, sir,” Shoji said as he bowed deeply.

“Please, sit.” Oda motioned to the floor in front of him with his paw.

“Thank you sir,” Shoji replied nervously as he knelt down and then sat back on his feet.

“How long have you been with the clan, Shoji?”

“Um, four months, sir.”

“Ah, just before Takashi left us.”

“Yes, that’s correct, sir.”

“How do you feel about having a new Boss, Shoji?”

“You seem to be very,” he paused for a moment as he searched for the least offensive word possible, “effective.”

Oda smiled. “This operation became a bit loose under Takashi’s leadership. I’m just returning it to its former glory.”

“Yes, sir.”

Oda shifted his position, flopping over on his back and hanging his head over the edge of the cushion. He looked at Shoji upside-down. “You want to move up in the organization, don’t you, Shoji?”

“Actually, sir,” Shoji shifted his position, sitting back and putting more weight on his feet, “I’d like to become an engineer, like my father. I joined the Clan in order to earn money for college.”

Oda licked his paw and then flipped back over and frowned at Shoji. “Your father, hmm? You know, I’m aware that my predecessor was inclined to look favorably upon these mixed allegiances, but I’m not my predecessor.”

“Sir?”

“I demand total allegiance from my clan members, Shoji. It’s the only way we’re going to win this war.”

“I didn’t know we were at war, sir.”

“We’re not yet, but we will be,” Oda began to purr.

“With who, sir?”

The tip of Oda’s tail began to flick back and forth. “With the Capitoline Triad, my boy.”

“With the Triad?” Shoji began to sweat.

“Indeed. It will be a war to end all wars, and I’m going to need every soldier I can get.” Oda twisted his head and stared at the wall to his right.

Shoji looked over but saw nothing. He couldn’t get comfortable for some reason, so he shifted his position again, leaning forward on his knees this time. After half a minute, he said quietly, “Sir?”

“Mmm? Oh.” Oda turned his gaze back to Shoji, “That’s why I’m trying to weed out the weak now. You don’t want to be one of the weak, do you?”

“No sir.”

“Good,” Oda said before yawning. He curled up on the cushion, placed his tail over his head and said nothing more.

A minute later, Shoji stood up, bowed, and left.

The next day, Shoji stood in front of the library, trying not to sweat. The heat of the Martian sun made the summers unbearably hot, and he was glad that he decided not to wear the leather pants today; instead, he wore jeans and a white t-shirt.

He was watching for Mei. They had planned to go to the park to get ice cream again after school, but he had to drop books off at the library, so Mei had agreed to pick him up. From what he knew of Mei, he was expecting something normal: a Europa maybe, or a little Shockwave coup. He was extremely surprised, then, to see a ’35 Inferno pull up to the curb.

The car was painted jet black with orange and yellow flames running along the side. Its blunt front end stood in contrast to a set of foot high fins on either side of the trunk. To complete the hot-rod image, it floated less than three inches off the ground. The passenger side window rolled down and Mei’s voice drifted across from the driver’s seat, “Hop in, Shoji.”

“Wow, Mei, this is unreal!” he said as he opened the door and climbed in.

“Thanks,” she tilted her head and smiled, “I modified it myself. Hopped up the engine and lowered it about three inches.”

“That’s amazing.”

“Plenty of room for back-seat-bingo, too,” she said with a wink.

“At least let me buy you some ice cream first,” Shoji said with a laugh.

“I didn’t mean you, goof,” Mei giggled as she hit the gas and blasted into traffic; Shoji was thrown back in his seat. The volume of the radio increased as the low thrum of the antigrav engine rose to a high-pitched whine; Mei tapped her hand on the steering wheel in time to the walking bass line of the of the rockabilly as she deftly dodged the tanks, rag-tops, and hot-rods that crowded Tokyo III’s streets.

Less than three minutes later, Mei swerved, cut off a truck, and skidded expertly into a free parking space. “We’re here,” she said excitedly as she jumped out of the car. Shoji sat in silence for nearly half a minute before Mei tapped on his window. “Hey, you coming?”

Shoji nodded slowly and reached gingerly for the door handle, afraid of doing anything to spook the car. *Oh, thank you ancestors*, he thought as he stepped out onto solid earth.

Mei cocked her head and frowned at him. “Don’t you like my driving, Shoji?”

“No, it’s fine. You’re very good at it.” Shoji replied with a smile. *Just very fast.*

“Good, let’s get ice cream!” she said as she grabbed his hand and led him into the park. Shoji took the time to notice that she was wearing the same pink poodle skirt that she had been wearing in the park the other day, but had accompanied it with a low-cut kimono top.

“You look great, Mei.”

“Thanks,” she replied with a coy smile.

After buying ice cream cones, Shoji and Mei strolled through the park. Mei was uncharacteristically chatty, which Shoji was thankful for. He was having trouble concentrating on anything for very long since his meeting with the Boss.

They had passed the tilt-a-whirl and were headed for the merry-go-round when Mei turned to Shoji. “So what’s your story, morning glory?”

“Huh?”

“You haven’t been talking this whole time. Did my driving really rattle your cage that bad?”

“Oh, no, I’m sorry,” Shoji laughed. “No, I just had a meeting with Boss Oda yesterday.”

“Ah, I see. I’m guessing it didn’t go that well,” she said in between licks of her cone.

“No, not really. I told him that I’m trying to save money for college.”

“What did he say?”

“He said that I had ‘mixed allegiances.’”

“Hmm,” Mei caught a drip of ice cream that was about to fall from her hand.

“Yeah. He also said that there was going to be a war with the Capitoline Triad.”

“A war?”

“Yeah. I guess he’s intent on taking over the whole city for himself.”

“Wow. That’s heavy.”

“I really don’t want to be in the Clan if that’s where this is headed.”

“So what can you do?”

“I don’t know. That’s the problem.”

“You could just tell them that you quit.”

“No. Boss Oda would never let that slide. Besides, I wouldn’t want to get Ichiro in trouble.”

“Ah, don’t worry about that drag,” Mei smiled, “he needs a little trouble to get his ass in gear.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

As they passed the merry-go-round, a familiar voice sounded loudly from behind them, “Think fast!”

Shoji turned around just in time to get an ice cream cone in the face. “Agh! Man, why do you have to be such a nosebleed?”

“Ichiro, that is so uncool!” Mei fumed.

“Heh, only to a square,” he said as he smoothed back his hair. Shoji noticed that Ichiro’s pompadour was significantly shorter than the last time he saw him.

“What happened to your nest, man?”

“Huh? Oh, well, I realized that I was spending too much time looking cool and not enough time actually being cool.”

“My mom made him cut it,” Mei said with a snort.

“Hey, Mei. Why don’t you go drop dead twice.”

“What, and look like you?”

Ichiro rolled his eyes. “Anyway, I’ve got good news, Clyde. This is like crazy, man. The ancestors want to see you.”

“What? Really? The ancestors? I didn’t think my meeting with Boss Oda went that well.”

“I guess you were on the stick man. If the ancestors want to see you, you’re made in the shade.”

“Shoji, that’s great!” Mei exclaimed as she grabbed his arm and pulled herself close to him.

“Shoji, that’s great!” Ichiro exclaimed in a high pitched voice, as he clapped his hands together and batted his eyelids.

“Get lost, you spaz!” Mei yelled as she threw her ice cream cone at Ichiro’s head.

“Easy, baby!” Ichiro yelped as he barely ducked the flying creamy confection, “It’s deadsville here anyway – I’m going to split.” He smoothed the hair that had fallen out of place and then strutted off.

“Ugh, I hate him.” Mei said as she watched her brother disappear around the merry-go-round.

“He’s ok,” Shoji said as he put his arm around Mei’s waist. “He just tries too hard.”

“Well, he needs to try harder, ‘cause whatever he’s doing isn’t working.” She turned to him and pressed herself close. “Anyway, it sounds like you don’t have to worry – things are working out.”

“Yeah, I guess. Cool, huh?”

“What do you say we get out of here?” Mei said as she grabbed his hand and pulled him along. They made their way through the park and then climbed back into her ’35 Inferno.

“Oh, I have to show you the coolest thing about this car,” Mei smiled as she hit a button on the console. Shoji held his breath expecting to be rocketed into space, but the only thing that happened was that the windows turned an opaque black, leaving the orange glow of the dashboard the only illumination.

“Oh?” Shoji said, puzzled.

“That’s not what’s cool,” Mei smiled, before nodding to the backseat. “That’s what’s cool.”

“Oh!”

Shoji took a deep breath before entering the ancestor’s shrine. He wasn’t quite sure why they wanted to see him, and he hoped that the bottle of sake he had brought would be a good enough

offering for them. *It's now or never*, he thought to himself as he opened the door and stepped inside.

With the advent of neural imaging, death was no longer necessarily the end of one's existence. After death, the brain could be scanned, and a perfect replica of one's memories and personality reconstructed. The replica could be interfaced with via computer system, loaded into a robotic head, or, for the very wealthy, even loaded into an entirely new body.

While this didn't actually resurrect the deceased, it provided his survivors with easy access to years of experience and information, and in many cases, the comfort of hanging on to a small part of a loved one.

The robotic heads of Goro, Zenko, and Nobu, the Green Dragon Clan's former leaders, sat on top of an altar. In front of them were incense bowls, cups full of sake, and elaborate jade dragon statues – each gifts from clan members, politicians, businessmen, and anyone else who wanted to stay on the Clan's good side. [Image 3] Shoji was a bit surprised that Boss Takashi hadn't joined them yet, but nonetheless crossed the room and knelt down in front of them.

“Greetings, ancestors,” Shoji said as he opened the bottle of sake, poured out three cups, and then placed one under each of the heads. “I bring you an offering.”

“More sake?” Goro, the first head, asked incredulously as he opened his eyes and stared at Shoji.

“What good does sake do any of us?” said Zenko, the second head, as he too opened his eyes and regarded the young gang member.

Nobu, the third ancestor, looked over at Shoji and shook his head in dismay.

“It's not like any of us can drink any more,” said Goro.

“Now, a cigar I could probably manage,” added Zenko.

Nobu licked his lips.

“Ah, I haven't had a cigar in three years,” Goro murmured.

“Do you have any cigars?” asked Zenko.

“No,” Shoji stammered, “but I have some cigarettes.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled, half-full pack.

“Ah, that'll do!” exclaimed Zenko.

“Yes, give one here!” demanded Goro.

Nobu looked at the cigarettes greedily.

Shoji pulled a cigarette from the pack, lit it, and then passed it from mouth to mouth.

“Excellent!” roared Goro.

“Tremendous,” sighed Zenko.

Nobu simply smiled.

“So what can we do for you?” asked Goro.

“Don’t you mean, ‘What can I do for you?’” Shoji said as he ground the cigarette out in an incense bowl. “You asked to see me.”

“Did we?” asked Goro.

“Oh yes, so we did,” replied Zenko.

Nobu nodded in agreement.

“That’s right,” said Goro. “You made an impression on Oda.”

“Yes, but not the kind you were probably hoping for,” said Zenko.

“Indeed, he was quite displeased. He mentioned that he was collecting little fingers, and that yours would be next.”

Shoji gulped, “I’m sorry ancestors.” He prostrated himself on the floor in front of their altar.

“Ha! Get up Shoji,” said Goro.

“Indeed, that’s precisely the kind of impression that we were hoping to hear about,” said Zenko.

“I’m sorry?”

“You see, we are very displeased with Oda.”

“Yes, very displeased.”

“The Green Dragon Clan was founded to bring peace to Tokyo III, not war.”

“That’s why we’ve maintained a truce with the Capitoline Triad for the past one hundred years.”

“Yes, everyone is happy that way.”

Nobu nodded in agreement.

“So why did you want to see me?” asked Shoji.

“We need you to overthrow Oda for us.”

“What? Why me? I’m not even that high up in the Clan,” asked Shoji.

“Ah, but that’s exactly why. You haven’t been indoctrinated yet,” said Goro.

“Those with a longer history might resist,” added Zenko.

“Ok,” said Shoji, now feeling a bit nauseous.

“Not by yourself, of course.”

“No, you’ll have assistance.”

“Ichiro?” Shoji asked, afraid of the answer.

Nobu giggled.

“No, Shoji,” Goro said as he shook his head in dismay.

“You will bring Takashi back.”

“Boss Takashi?”

“Indeed. You may have noticed that he is not with us yet.”

Shoji nodded.

“We have made arrangements for his return.”

“You must talk to Boss Juno; she is assisting us.”

Shoji was quiet for a moment as he tried to process everything: overthrowing Oda, talking to Boss Juno, and bringing Takashi back. He could feel his stomach tighten and felt a bit light headed. “Ok. What if Boss Oda asks what we talked about?”

“Tell him that we told you to shape up and do everything he says,” Goro said with a laugh.

“Indeed, he’s pompous enough to believe it,” Zenko said wistfully.

“Thank you ancestors,” Shoji said as he bowed deeply.

“Make us proud, boy,” Goro growled.

“We’re counting on you,” Zenko added.

Shoji stood up, bowed again and walked to the door. As he placed his hand on the handle, Nobu finally spoke in a deep baritone voice, “Good luck, Shoji.”

Juno looked into the mirror and smiled. She liked the image that stared back at her: young and beautiful, with flaxen hair and green eyes. Her cheeks were rosy and pleasantly plump, and her smile shone a brilliant white.

“Holography off,” she instructed, and the image in the mirror transformed. Instead of the beautiful visage of a young woman, she now peered into the eyes of an old and wrinkled crone. The longevity treatments had taken their toll: now her skin stretched over her skeleton like canvas over a wooden frame; the hollows around her eyes had sunken; her skin had turned a mottled grey; and she had lost every hair on her body. [Image 5]

She sighed, one hundred and thirty years, and yet I’m still can’t bear the thought of it ending. I wonder, though, am I getting soft in my old age?

“Holography on,” she said sadly, and the image of a young, vibrant woman replaced the crone. She slipped on a silk kimono and hobbled out into the hall. One hundred years ago she had founded the Capitoline Triad, and had quickly formed a truce with the Green Dragon Clan’s first leader, Goro. She had renewed the truce with each successor, but now that the diabolical Oda was threatening war – well, she didn’t know what to do.

I never should have agreed to let that cat succeed Takashi, she thought, but he seemed so...sleepy.

A man wearing a pompadour and black, leather pants ran up to her and bowed. “Boss Juno?”

“Yes?”

“The man the ancestors have sent is here.”

“Very good,” Juno replied with a nod. “I’ll meet him in the drawing room.”

At least the ancestors agree with me that Oda needs to be removed, she thought as she slowly made her way down the hallway. Outside the drawing room, she readjusted her kimono, tightened her belt, and then entered.

“Greetings, Boss Juno,” Shoji said as he bowed deeply.

“Please, don’t remain standing on my account,” Juno said as she settled down in a chair. “So, the ancestors have sent you to me.”

“Yes, that’s correct. They…”

She interrupted him, “I know what they want, and I happen to agree with them.” She leaned forward slightly, and then continued, “Oda needs to be replaced.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, and we need to bring back Takashi in order to lead the Clan.”

“Right, but how do we do that?”

“Ah, technology is a marvelous thing, Shoji.” Juno half-smiled. “You only have to be willing to spend the money on it.”

Shoji looked puzzled, “I don’t understand.”

“You’ll understand quickly enough once you see him. He’s at one of my warehouses, being…prepared.”

“So I need to go get him?”

“Quite,” Juno smiled. “I’ll have my assistant give you the address. You should tell no one about this, by the way.”

“Of course,” Shoji said as he stood and bowed.

“Oh, and Shoji,” Juno said just as Shoji was about to leave.

“Yes?”

“Be careful. We’re all counting on you.”

The Triad warehouse was located near the eastern edge of the city, and it took Shoji nearly two hours to make it there by subway and on foot. The sun had long set, and, as he looked at his watch, he realized that it was nearly midnight. He looked around uncomfortably – if Triad members found him out here, would they believe that he was working for Boss Juno?

He stopped under each streetlight to check the directions that Juno’s assistant had given him. When he finally found the steel-sided building, he was unimpressed. A single, rusted door opened directly onto the sidewalk. He tugged on the handle, and, to his surprise, it was unlocked.

Inside, the warehouse was filled with robotics parts: barrels of pistons, titanium rods, and gears were crammed against the walls, while boxes of wires, cables, microprocessors, and circuit

boards were stacked in giant piles. Shoji wound his way through the mess toward a single light bulb that hung over a work bench near the middle of the floor.

A bespectacled, middle-aged man in a white lab coat was sitting at the work bench; he appeared to be soldering together a pile of wires and gears. “Doctor Nakamura?” Shoji asked.

The man startled and looked around frantically, “Yes, who’s there?”

“My name is Shoji. I’m here to pick up Boss Takashi.”

“Oh, right,” the man said with an air of relief, “Boss Juno told me you’d be coming.” He stood up from the work bench and motioned Shoji to follow, “This way.”

Shoji stared at the various cables, wires, and actuators as the doctor led him through the warehouse. “I have to tell you,” said Nakamura, “I was a bit dismayed that you were coming so soon. He’s not exactly complete, yet.”

“Not complete?”

“You’ll see,” the doctor said. “By the way, did you bring any food?”

“I didn’t know I was supposed to. Can he eat?”

“Not technically, no, but that hasn’t stopped him from trying.”

“This is a new model, by the way. Much more advanced than the previous ancestors. Better funding.”

“Oh?”

Nakamura stopped in front of a cylindrical, stainless steel chamber, which stood a foot taller than he and was about twice as wide. A tangle of tubes and wires emerged from the top and sides, and a section of the front had a handle on it – clearly designed to be a door.

“Ready?” asked the doctor.

“Sure,” Shoji shrugged.

“Ok then,” he said as he grabbed the handle and pulled.

The creaking of steel hinges echoed throughout the warehouse as the door opened, letting light stream into the interior of the cylinder. Shoji’s eyes widened with surprise as Boss Takashi’s voice echoed from inside. “Shoji, my boy. It’s good to see you!”

Shoji stood outside the warehouse in the cold Martian night. He pulled out his phone and dialed Mei's number, hoping that she was still awake.

"Hello?" Mei's voice answered groggily.

"Mei, it's Shoji. Can you pick me up?"

"Don't be a goof, Shoji, it's nearly midnight."

"Come on, Mei. Please?"

"Shoji, I'm not coming all the way out there in the middle of the night so that you can get me in the backseat again," she paused for a moment. "You should have called around ten."

"No, I'm serious. I need your help."

She sighed. "Ok. What's going on?"

"I've got to deliver something, but it's a bit...bigger...than I thought it would be."

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you over the phone."

"This isn't going to get the heat after me, is it?"

"No. Well. Not the heat at any rate."

Mei sighed. "Ok. Where should I meet you?"

Shoji sighed in relief when, less than fifteen minutes later, a '35 Inferno screamed to a halt in front of the curb. The driver's side door opened and Mei stepped out. "Lay it on me," she said with a frown, "why did you drag me all the way out to nowhere-seville in the middle of the night?"

Shoji opened the warehouse door and looked inside, "Boss?"

Out stepped a figure that was covered from head to toe in a silken robe. In the soft glow of the streetlights, even its face was shrouded in shadow.

Mei stared as the man pulled back the hood of the robe before removing it altogether. After a minute, she let out a low whistle, "Like crazy, man." In front of her stood a life-size, titanium skeleton – completely devoid of muscle and flesh.

Ichiro emerged from the car and stared in amazement, "Woah. That's the most."

Shoji looked sidelong at Mei. “What’s he doing here?”

“You said it was something big. I thought we might need the help.”

“I kind of like the new look,” the skeleton said as he patted his ribs.

“Mei, Ichiro, this is Boss Takashi,” said Shoji.

“Boss Takashi?” Ichiro said, stunned.

“Well, a copy of me, at any rate,” Takashi said, “the ancestors decided that since things went so well under my leadership, I deserved more than just a head.”

“This is so radioactive!” Ichiro said excitedly. “Wait ‘till I tell everyone about this.”

“No!” Shoji barked, “You can’t tell anyone until...” He looked at Takashi for approval.

“Go ahead – it’ll be front page news by tomorrow.”

“...until Oda is removed from power.”

“Woah – heavy,” said Ichiro.

“The ancestors wanted me to pick up Takashi, so that he could go reclaim his position as head of the Clan.”

“So,” Mei said pensively, “where are we supposed to deliver him?”

“Back to the noodle house,” Shoji replied, “That’s where Oda is.” He looked over at the former leader of the Clan, who was staring at his metallic, skeletal hands, clenching and unclenching them, and chuckling.

“Do any of you have some food? I’m starving,” Takashi said as he looked at three teenagers.

“Oh. Oh. Oh. I’ve got this,” Ichiro said as he fished a candy bar out of his pocket.

“That’ll do.” Takashi took the proffered candy and stuffed it between his skeletal jaws. He chewed for a few moments, but only succeeded in smearing chocolate all over his face. “Hmm, as much as I like this look, I’ll have to get the process finished soon if I ever want to eat anything,” he said with a grumble.

“Shall we go, Boss?” Shoji offered.

“Yes, indeed. Let’s get this over with.”

Mei looked fearfully at Shoji, who just shrugged. “You don’t have to come, if you don’t want. You can just drop us off.”

She frowned and crossed her arms, “Not if you’re going to be there, goof.”

“Oh!” Takashi exclaimed, “I almost forgot.” He disappeared into the warehouse and then reappeared a moment later carrying a four-foot long, black metal case. “I’m going to need this,” he said as he patted the case lovingly.

As the ’35 Inferno pulled up to the curb in front of the Green Dragon Clan’s headquarters, Shoji began to feel nauseous. He wasn’t sure what was going to happen, and the life-size metal skeleton sitting beside him in the back seat wasn’t helping to calm his nerves.

After every one piled out of the car, Takashi pulled out the black metal case and set it on the ground. He flipped open the latches, kicked back the lid, and pulled out a massive, automatic machine gun. [Image 2] He looked over at Shoji, “I always bring this with me to negotiations.”

Shoji nodded nervously, but followed the skeleton’s lead and walked toward the door of the noodle house. He turned to motion to Mei to stay in the car, but wasn’t surprised to find out that she was already right behind him.

As they stepped through the door into the empty restaurant, Takashi opened fire. Shoji pushed Mei to the ground and covered her with his body as tables, chairs, and noodle bowls exploded around them. The titanium skeleton kept the trigger pressed for a full minute as even the support columns of the building were chewed to shreds by the hail of bullets.

“What was that?” Shoji exclaimed once the bullets stopped. He lifted his head up to see the extent of the damage.

“I find that it always helps to set the terms of the negotiation right up front.”

Ichiro stumbled in from the street. “What’s going on?” he yelled.

Takashi waved to him to be quiet, and Shoji looked at him and shrugged.

“Are you ok, Mei?” Shoji asked the girl who was lying under him.

She was quiet for a moment, and then smiled. “Yeah. I’m on cloud nine.”

Shoji gasped and quickly rolled off of Mei. Then he looked up to see a black and white cat wander out of the back room. It jumped up onto a broken table, sat, licked its paw, and then looked at the group assembled in front of it. It cocked its head and stared at Takashi for a full minute before glancing at Ichiro and then settling its gaze on Shoji.

“Why, Shoji?” Oda hissed.

“I told you, I’m only doing this to save up money for college.”

“I should have collected your finger while I had a chance.”

Shoji shuddered, but then Takashi lowered the gun and stepped forward. “I’m taking the clan back, Oda.”

“I see that.”

“You’re not going to make any trouble, are you?”

Oda licked his front paw and ran it over his face. “Can I still sit on your lap?”

“Of course.”

Oda turned his head and nipped at his fur for a second, then looked back at Takashi. “Will you still feed me toro?”

“Absolutely!”

“Even for breakfast?”

Takashi laughed, “Yes, even for breakfast.”

“Fine then,” Oda said with a sniff, and then turned and jumped down off the table. “I’m going back to sleep.”

After the cat disappeared into the back room, Takashi leaned down and helped Shoji and Mei to their feet. “You make a cute couple,” he smiled.

Shoji blushed, but then put his arm around her waist. She leaned against his chest and smiled. “Thank you, Boss Takashi.”

“What? A couple?” Ichiro exclaimed from near the front door.

Takashi shook his titanium skull and laughed. “I should go talk to the ancestors and thank them for sending you. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Well, I do want to study hyperspace – is there any chance you could put in a good word at Tokyo University?”

“Tokyo University? That’s in Triad territory. How about Mars Polytechnic?”

“Don’t you start,” interjected Mei, “wasn’t the whole point of this to maintain the truce?”

“Indeed it was,” Takashi shook his head. “I’ll talk to Boss Juno. I believe her son is the Dean of Engineering at the University.”

“Thank you sir,” Shoji said as he bowed deeply.

“You know what we need?” said Takashi, “some music.” He turned, “Ichiro, find the jukebox.”

Ichiro looked around at the debris filled room; dust was beginning to settle upon the wreckage. He picked up a splintered table leg and tossed it out the door, then turned back to see Shoji and Mei locked in a kiss. He groaned. *Man, what a bunch of squares.*