

# PAWN

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SCIENCE FICTION AND  
THE "GAME OF KINGS"

# TO INFINITY



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# KOKOMU

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Doorbell: wind-chimes of bamboo and glass gracing a Shinto shrine. But it was not a doorbell, and Samuel Kagami adjusted his thinking. The jamasura, a large procaryotic cell with electronic call-extensors, responded as was its function, chiming when a hand touched the door.

Neither was it a door.

The Tō-screen, a series of unicellular giants linked in symbiotic unity, whose cytoplasm had been design-engineered for tensile strength, weatherproofing, and opacity, formed the splendid arched doorway to Samuel Kagami's home. The arch signified a marvel of neobiotic construction available only to the elite of the Western Nipponese Consolidät. The Tō-screen parted as Kagami approached, and he greeted his visitor.

"Chokki san. May you give me five."

"Kagami san, this is also right on." The plump Neobiotix field representative, clad in conservative grey knickers and shoulder coat, an aluminum brechet at his knee, bowed, signaling an end to the exchange of formal pleasantries. Kagami bowed also and indicated the livingroom with a sweep of his hand.

He hoped the sweep had been well-timed and correct. Chokki removed his platform-zoris and set them on



the tatami, suddenly reduced a full fifteen centimeters in height. "I received your call only this morning. Forgive my tardiness."

"No apology necessary. But accepted," said Kagami. "I am most grateful that you have traveled so far to see me. It was not an inconvenience I hope?"

"None. My pleasure."

Kagami smiled uneasily and led his guest into the livingroom. The cochin lanterns and moribana floral arrangements lent the room a traditional appearance, yet Kagami felt, as always, that something still was lacking. "Excuse my forwardness then. May I come to the point and dispense with politic?"

Chokki quickly averted his eyes, allowing no movement or gesture to betray his discomfort. "Certainly," said the small Line Nippon, stiffly. "As you wish."

Though Kagami's grandfather had been a Once American in the days of the Union, no one would dare call Kagami an American now—not, at least, without the offering of swords. Yet the fact that Kagami was only a Nipponese by circumstance—a *sansei*, third generation citizen of the Consolidät—was evident in his desire to rush through formal ceremony. The Line Nippon—of a respected Nipponese ancestry—held the *sansei* in low esteem for this reason.

*Ki ni yotte uo o motomu:* you ask an elm tree for pears.

This was Kagami's heritage; perhaps, in time, he would outgrow this natural impatience.

"It is my southern wall," said Kagami.

"A difficulty?"

"No. Without doubt there is no problem with the manufacture. Neobiotix has done a splendid job with my home. I am most pleased."

"Honored," said Chokki. Kagami poured three deciliters of Mogen David Imperial Sake into an earthenware cup and offered it to Chokki. "*Domo arigato.*"

"Most welcome. Perhaps what I need is a strategy."

"Your wall is weak then?" Chokki sipped gingerly from the cup.

"Near to crumble."

Chokki hesitated for a moment. "And of strategy. Your neighbor has also a consultant?"

"Orgosynthetix Corporation. We have, of course, agreed to unilateral aid." Kagami turned to fill his own cup with sake, hoping to disguise his irritation. Were Kagami not a *sansei*, he knew, Chokki would never have offered such an impertinent inquiry. Had he implied that Kagami might *cheat*?—that he might seek tactical advice illicitly? Both Kagami and his neighbor, Tonari Ze, had agreed upon allowing professional consultation; Kagami's word need not have been questioned.

Kagami felt the strain of two echelons meeting, the friction of separate and distinct social strata grating as they touched. He smothered the sparks in politic.

"Very fine. Show me then your southern wall." Shyly, Kagami led the Neobiotix field representative through the livingroom and into the tea-room. The Tō-screen parted and Kagami felt embarrassment at the disarray. "*Oya!*"

"Indeed. As you see, the southern wall is nearly surrounded."

Kagami felt shame at the loss of face. Very few *sansei* could afford a neobiotic home, and fewer actually entered in competition. It was said that the ability to play Go—the ancient game of territorial strategy upon which neobiotic play was based—had its roots in ancestry, and though no prohibitions stood between a *sansei* and the game, it was generally agreed that the Line Nippon made the best player. Pitting one's home against another's, using true territory and not a symbolic representation was thought to be a delicate art, and not one to be toyed with lightly.

Chokki inspected the tea room carefully. The tea room wall—built of a flux-organism called *kābe*, a chromoplasmic which hardened at some points and un-



dulated at others—was badly buckled. The ceiling sagged under the considerable strain of the damaged wall, and the *kābe* had lost a great deal of its translucency. Without light, the synthetic organism would grow increasingly weaker, unable to repair itself photosynthetically, and the architectural stress would also increase until the tea room fell, or Kagami surrendered.

This, of course, was Ze's strategy; once Ze's northern diningroom wall had surrounded the tea-room and blocked the ultraviolet, he would need only to wait patiently for Kagami's defenses to fall.

Patience was one thing Tonari Ze had plenty of.

"An inventive offensive. Orgosynthetix is a respectable firm," said Chokki, examining the *kābe*-wall with an expert touch. "Or perhaps Ze san is an inventive fellow himself."

Few words. Much said. Samuel Kagami knew that he had attacked foolishly. A quick offensive with which he hoped to gain an advantage in the opening play, had failed, and he found that he had concentrated too much of the house's energy on a single point. He had ignored Ze's threats on many borders, and now those threats had matured and Kagami found himself trapped.

The tea room groaned.

"An honored opponent. What kind of defensive strategy do you recommend to maintain the tea room?"

Chokki laughed mildly. "No, I'm afraid not, Kagami san. One may only extend folly in this way. Incorporate the loss."

"Withdraw?"

"Brute force cannot rise. A fat defense is no answer. Notice how lean is his attacking line." Kagami examined the wall which protruded through the tea room *kābe* in four spots. Indeed, saber thin. "There is no shame in withdrawal." Chokki once again looked away.

Kagami studied the well-mannered Line Nippon. What did this one know of shame? Kagami's grand-

father, Charles Carmody, had been a wealthy man and had left Kagami a modest legacy. Thus, Kagami moved in circles usually closed to a *sansei*, played with the luxurious toys of a Line Nippon, and lived as well as many corporate functionaries.

Yet, there were restrictions. Unwritten, politely applied.

Carmody had been killed during the Incorporation. He had called it the Invasion, but politic declared that Kagami refrain from using such terms. As economic crises peaked the Union had been forced to begin auctioning their last resource: Land. Allies were invited to extend their holdings, and the Nipponese, for whom landscape was the only limiting factor to further prosperity, heartily accepted.

Purchasing land in strategic areas they established base colonies on the continent, immigrating in droves. And though they held less than fifteen percent of the actual land area in Once America, their ability to use less—more resourcefully—had quickly insured that their population would exceed that of the Union. Relocation of Union citizens out of Nipponese-occupied territory had been subsidized and expensive, and fiscal ruin had been nothing but forestalled.

It was war that killed Charles Carmody.

There had been no terror jets, no thermonuclear war cries, no multimegaton verbiages. No shouting. The gentleman hordes of Nipponese had attacked politely, armed to the teeth with yen. They incorporated the Union and turned it into a thriving, well-conducted economic sector, which now comprised nearly seventy percent of their vast holdings in the Western Nipponese Consolidat.

Though Carmody had remained a staunch Unionist, resentful and distrustful of the Incorporation from the first (he had insisted that Kagami's given name have at least one *L* in it), his pride had been equal in tenacity to that of the highest ranking Line Nippon.



What they now called politic was not a new custom for Kagami; it had, like so many things, simply changed names. Carmody had been one of those millions whose real estate had been badly bartered, and he'd been forced to sell a manufacturing empire for a fraction of its worth, simply because it lay in Nipponese states. He had retired, rather than attempting to revitalize the business, and had died alone, broken, bitter, soon thereafter.

Kagami studied the half-empty glass of sake, moodily.

"In triumph do not gloat. In defeat do not brood," said Chokki. He pushed a sprig of tomb-black hair from his finely curved face. Why did victors always throw platitudes and maxims in the face of the vanquished? "Reinforce your back line here, in the hallway. Do not extend folly with malicious play. Begin now a forthright attack." Chokki glanced about the room. "Where is your Center?"

Kagami stepped out of the tea room and led Chokki to the *gōban*—the game board. The *gōban* was the hand-crafted component of the large home-computer which controlled the neobiotic play, and resembled a greatly expanded Go board. Kagami's stones were blue diodes on the face of the computerized *gōban*, Ze's red. The square plane was divided into equal sized area; the northern and southern borders were marked with letters, the eastern and western with numbers, and the lines intersected to form a grid. Kagami pointed to the D-8 sector, his tea room. Ze's red glowing stones formed a Tiger's Mouth about the sector and threatened to devour the unit.

"How to play?"

Chokki suppressed a sigh. "One stone, Kagami san, holds infinite power. One stone may alter the outcome of a game. Though surrounded by enemy stones, no soldier is too small or insignificant to affect a victory for his legion. I suggest an outpost here." With a tawny finger, the Line Nippon indicated the N-13 region.

"But I cannot afford any more stones for outpostting. I am *kokomu*, surrounded, on many fronts. To withdraw a single stone for outpostting will mean the collapse of a unit elsewhere."

"Mr. Kagami," said Chokki, "I am a Neobiotix field representative. I can *sell* you an outpost."

Chokki fiddled with his knee brechet and Kagami closed his eyes. Forcing Chokki to make such a tactless remark, to breach etiquette so boldly, made Kagami wonder if Chokki's scorn for the *sansei* was not entirely unfounded. He did not apologize, however, knowing that even such a gesture would only prolong—what must be for Chokki—a very difficult situation.

Neither could he tell Chokki of his financial straits; that his legacy was tied up in the house and that he had been living on equity and small investments for nearly three months, less than the length of one game. One did not discuss such things with intimates, much less business associates. Kagami felt as if he were suffocating.

"I . . . I have . . . I am unable to make such a purchase at this time."

Chokki nodded and both men studied the *gōban* with newfound intensity, each carefully avoiding the other's eyes. Kagami drained his sake. The moment stretched into humiliation.

Finally, Chokki spoke. "I am sorry. Professionally, then, I must judge your situation as hopeless. I suggest you turn game control over to your home-computer and allow it to finish the game mathematically. Perhaps your losses can be minimized."

"Thank you," said Kagami. This was his advice. "More sake?"

Chokki bowed. "Your hospitality is overwhelming. However, I am afraid I must leave. Pressing business of urgency. Take it then in lightness, Kagami san."

"And you also be quite cool." He escorted Chokki to the front Tō-screen, reciting further pleasantries, and bid him good day and fortune. The Tō-screen parted,



In the livingroom, Samuel Kagami studied the *gōban*, poured himself another two deciliters of sake, and considered. He had spent nearly three quarters of his grandfather's bequest (a mere fraction of what it would have been, had it not been converted from dor-rars to yen) on the neobiotic home. It was a symbol of that which most *sansei* never hoped to own, and it had indeed elevated his social position. But, like a fool, he had entered into play with a superior opponent, a Line Nippon, Tonari Ze, and was now in danger of losing both home and face. He understood why Chokki had seen him as a stumbling buffoon, an inept inferior, and he detested Chokki for making the distinction so painfully evident.

*... must judge your situation as hopeless. . .*

He also realized that it was his third bottle of sake today.

Kagami slid an antique rice-paper partition from the far wall. Seventeen shelves. The true bequest. This was what remained of Charles Carmody.

Memorabilia. Once Americana. Relics. Time-crippled dinosaurs from a day now broken and best set aside. Yet, these items sparked Kagami's imagination, excited him from within, and a day did not pass when he failed to slip aside the rice-paper and fondle one or two of them, evoking memories of days he could not possibly own.

*Zane Grey*. Ah, the name itself surged with a raw and vital power. Like true anger from the blood-drenched fist of an electric god—what *power* in the name alone, and in the words between the crumbling paper binders.

*Dashiell Hammett*. Intrigue and adventure! Trench-coated legends who roared and hungered and drank whiskies and did not hesitate to plug one full of lead should circumstances require such. Men who said as they pleased and disregarded politic, laughed in the faces of the world's well-mannered Chokkis.

*Louis L'amour*. Now here was time as real men had lived it; not packaged time, caged and tamed in a watch or crystal, but time which gouged and vomited and splayed itself upon a man's life like the colored legs of a venomous insect.

*Roger Keegan. Andrew North. Hal Kantos.*

Kagami traced the rim of the cowboy's hat upon the book jacket. It was Bart Gibson's hat. Bart, a stern and commanding wrangler, lean and supple in denim and steel, and his two brothers, Luke and Roy, stood poised for action as the badmen surrounded the Bar-S Ranch.

*Kokomu, three Gibsons?* thought Kagami.

He turned to the *gōban*. Another red stone twinkled to life near the tea room at D-8. Ze had moved, after a three day wait, and the third panel of the referee lighted GO: : :

Kagami's turn. He seated himself before the board.

*"I've got you covered, Luke. This town ain't big enough for both of us. Reach for the sky, horsethief!"*

Even as Kagami turned to capture the voice, his hand moved autonomously and lifted the stone from the D-7 sector, the last strong stone in the tea room unit.

*"Sheriff, the Wilker boys are down at the Bar-S. There's gonna be a whole bunch of shooting!"*

His fingers caressed the stone, placing it carefully between index and forefinger, and set it down with a smart click.

*"The three Gibson's at the Bar-S, Doc."*

*"Three Gibsons. Bar-S."*

*"Bar-S. Three."*

The stone clicked at S-3. The GO: : : light winked out and the referee indicated Ze's turn. Samuel Kagami felt dizzy.

He retreated to his lioo-chair and listened to his heart pump furiously, contemplating what had happened and realizing that—whatever had come over him a moment ago—he had made the worst of all possible moves. His delicate garden would now strike at the heart of Tonari



Ze's heavily reinforced den. The garden would be surrounded so quickly. The house would fall.

The sake made Kagami feel ill, and with no hesitation, he switched the game to computer control, as Chokki had suggested, closing his eyes tightly to take one last nap in his neobiotic home before conceding defeat.

By the time Samuel Kagami awoke, he owned all of Ze's territory.

The GO: : light had winked on four hours earlier, the ever patient electronic referee indicated that it was Kagami's turn. He studied his image in the polished surface of the *gōban*, and listened to the creaking of his den. He stroked his new moustache slowly, thinking that it made his face look more angular, harder, sharper.

Bisho Rinjin was an excellent player, and even with the full force of Kagami's combined territories, he had not answered Kagami's threats to the greenhouse hastily. Instead, he had played around Kagami and attacked the den, a subtle yet stinging offensive which Kagami could not ignore.

Kagami contemplated the *gōban*, recognized gestalts and micro gestalts, conceived patterned formations of stones, computed the intricate futures of both defense and offense. His hands eagerly kneaded the collar of his silk robe, his slippered feet tapped nervously. He poured his fifth cup of Johnny Walker New Tokyo Whiskey and gulped it hurriedly, waiting. He held the book in his lap, his fingers moving anxiously up and down the spine.

Finally: the peculiar spinning sensation. The *gōban* swirled in a splatter of color. He found himself holding a cup, and sighed.

"Please, some water," said the man.

The frail fellow, slumped in a straight-backed chair, groaned. His pock-marked face was a crucifixion of sweat and fatigue, the cracks in his snake-skin lips were made ghostly white by the blinding bulb which hung in

the interrogation room.

Kagami reached up, touched the bulb, and it swung ominously above the man's head. This was not Oklahoma, *circa* 1883. What then? When? Kagami looked down at his hands. The book was gone. He noticed his own stocky build, certainly not the slender *sansei* he had been a moment before, the nearly perfect shine on his black leather shoes, the shoulder-holster buckled expertly about his trunk.

"Are you okay, Lieutenant?" said a burly fellow, also wearing a pistol, but leaning against the far wall, smoking in the shadows.

Lieutenant? Kagami glanced at the man slumped in the chair in the center of the room. His wrists had deep red marks in them, and Kagami's hands went to his belt.

Handcuffs.

Kagami left the spotlighted circle and joined the two men at the other side of the room.

"You look tired," said the big fellow.

"Still worried about your brother?" The second man was thin and his voice had a high-pitched nasal quality. He wore a striped shirt with rolled sleeves, and a vest.

"I suppose so," said Kagami.

"Don't worry about Scotty," said the thin man, "he'll kill a couple of Krauts, knock in a few Nip heads, and be Stateside before you know it. He'll be alright."

"Yeah," said Kagami. "You're right."

Nips. That would make it somewhere around 1940, and, judging from the thin fellow's vocal tones, somewhere in the midwest. Perhaps Chicago or St. Louis.

"I don't think Joey's going to tell us anything," said the burly detective, whose badge indicated that his name was Meyers. Yes, there, on the badge: CPD. Chicago then.

"He knows where Calhoun is hiding."

"He ain't telling." Meyers shrugged.

Kagami listened carefully. Yes, this Joey was a prisoner and Murray Calhoun a stick-up man. All the infor-



mation seemed to be seeking and finding its proper place, as if Kagami had forgotten for only a moment, as if this man named Samuel Kagami—the *sansei*—had been but a tremor of stage-fright in a police Lieutenant's mind.

"I told you, I don't *know* no Murray Calhoun. I don't know where he is." Joey rotated his head, clamped his eyes shut in the bright light. Kagami felt a wave of anger come washing the shores of thought; the man was lying.

Joey's head bobbed, his neck seemed strangely contorted, his face a peculiar contrast of harsh light and shadows. The face seemed so familiar, so real, so close, so. . .

Kagami pulled back his right hand and smashed the backside across Joey's face. The sound echoed off the bare walls of the interrogation room with a reverberating crack. Joey's head swung sideways with the force of the blow, then sagged desperately to his chest. A slick stream of crimson wound its way from his nostril to his upper lip. The two men in the corner shifted uneasily, and Meyers lit another cigarette.

Kagami wiggled his fingers and blinked.

The contact . . . the flesh against flesh . . . the surge of his muscles . . . the yielding of bone . . . it had felt . . . felt *good*.

"Joey. Where is Murray Calhoun?" said Kagami, and even his voice was textured and full, precisely the words he wished to speak, exactly as he wished to speak them.

"I . . . I don't. . ." Kagami brought his fist back again. "Wait!"

His clenched hand hung in mid-air, a stop-action eagle waiting to descend. Joey's eye opened and closed spasmodically. "I think you screwed up my eye." He dabbed at the swollen purple cheek with his finger.

"Joey?"

"The Edgewater. He's at the Edgewater. But he'll see you coming. He ain't dumb, he'll see you and high-tail it out of there."

"Where at the Edgewater?"

"Room L-3. He's in L-3."

Samuel Kagami smiled. In some strange way, he wished that this Joey had held out just a little longer. The power of the blow, the explosion of contact, the invigorating stinging sensation of his palm—he had never before hit a man. Yes, it was interesting.

"Okay, Meyers, get him out of here," said Kagami.

L-3. He had what he'd come for.

"C'mon, Chokey," said the thin man, lifting the shaking prisoner from his seat. Kagami spun about.

"What did you call him?"

The thin man looked at Kagami peculiarly. "Chokey, Lieutenant. Name's Joey Chokey. You know that."

Kagami stared at the man he had struck. Joey Chokey smiled.

By playing the unexpected L-3 position, Kagami had begun an intensive pressing formation on the entire L-group, had turned a corner at H-6, and had quickly devastated Bisho Rinjin. The game of thirty days had not lasted another hour.

The jamasura hummed happily as Kagami greeted Chokki.

"In the midst of another game, I see," said Chokki, entering the livingroom. The northern wall was now greatly expanded, incorporating both dining room and garden in an elegant whole. Chokki nodded in admiration.

"It will be finished in two moves." Kagami wondered what Chokki had come for—he had not called for him—but thought it inhospitable to inquire. He offered sake.

"Many thanks, but no. I cannot stay long." Chokki spoke calmly, but his eyes kept darting about the room, always returning to rest for a moment on the *gōban*. "I have come in my very humble capacity to present a most unusual gift."



"Honored," said Kagami.

"Neobiotix has petitioned the Games Council on your behalf, and we have received permission to raise your status." Chokki paused dramatically. "To *Shihan* Player."

"A Master?" said Kagami. "I am overwhelmed."

"You have respectfully earned the title. I am humbled before your abilities. On my last visit I offered the opinion that your strategic situation was hopeless. Since that time, I have noted two change-of-property titles come through my office. Of course, I immediately offered my resignation to my employer, who graciously declined. Nevertheless, my error was unforgivable." The plump Line Nippon lowered his chin, a sign of submission and shame, but his eyes reflected stubbornness and animosity. Was there a small scab on his left cheek? Imagination.

"I differ, Chokki san. You made a most honest analysis. The acts of fate are not yours to predict."

"Not to be argumentative, but this was no hand of God. Superior thinking. However, I am pleased that you do not think ill of me. We wish then to present these tokens of our admiration." Chokki withdrew a slip of paper and a golden ring from his breast pocket and handed them to Kagami.

The ring was cool and smooth in Kagami's hand. He scrutinized it and noticed that it was inscribed with the word *Shinjitsu*—truth, encircled by a single banded line indicating Master status. The check was written for six million yen.

Why?

Kagami knew he was no Master. What had motivated Neobiotix and Chokki to recommend such honor? Indeed, his holdings were significant, particularly when one considered the amount of time in which he had accumulated them, but they certainly did not warrant the ultimate title of *Shihan*. He turned the golden band slowly in his hand.

Did Chokki know?

Impossible. It was his personal madness, his private dream sequence; a fantasy link to his unconscious, or a collective unconscious, or some universal intelligence which favored him. He had not decided which. But it was not shared—it would be impossible for Chokki to be aware of it.

Perhaps, thought Kagami, I do deserve the title. After all, was it not superior strategy which had wrested the L-3 move from the police lieutenant's prisoner? Yes, thought Kagami, indeed. A strategy which the gentlemen sirs have all but forgotten.

"You understand," said Chokki, apparently noting Kagami's hesitation, "that these trinkets are but expressions of our respect?"

Kagami met Chokki's eyes. *Respect?* Respect for a *sansei*? Kagami noticed, in Chokki's expression, the fine and uncooked seeds of condescension, as if he were laughing inwardly at the ignorant *sansei*, at this respect built of wire-mesh, an ornament, paying him off with a fistful of paper money and baubles. Quite suddenly, Kagami understood why.

"I am most flattered," said Kagami, fighting to conceal his anger, "but I cannot accept."

Chokki blinked like a Hiroshiman in the brightness.

"If I am of *Shihan* ability," said Kagami, "I may no longer engage in play. Is this correct?"

"Why . . . of course! Opponents must be of near-equal ability, of matched strength. No one may play a *Shihan*. Advantage does not come in domination of the novice, but in superior thinking with one's equals."

"Or one's betters?" Kagami handed the items back to Chokki, who accepted them unbelievably. "I am afraid your offer is much too gracious. I shall continue as a player."

A cheap ruse! A child's trick! Did this Line Nippon truly believe that Kagami would be so easily fooled? The transparency of the ploy was grave insult piggybacked upon intended injury. Kagami dug his fingernails into



his palms and contained himself.

Chokki began to speak, stopped, began again. "As you wish, though I do not know what we shall tell the Council. No precedent."

"Extend my deepest apologies," said Kagami. "May I catch you later, Chokki san."

Chokki bowed courteously and left the house. Kagami stood by the open Tō-screen and watched Chokki walk briskly down the manicured path, past spacious rock gardens and neatly calendared emperor tulips and Aegean windflowers, to his dart. Chokki clambered in to the small vehicle and escalated quietly into the overcast afternoon sky.

"Goodbye," called Kagami, waving with his right hand. His left hand closed and opened behind his back. Then he added in a whisper, "You little Nip."

The words tasted extraordinary.

Samuel Kagami remained on his horse, an impossibly black stallion, and leaned in the saddle to touch the stagecoach driver.

Dead.

The driver's throat was opened in a ragged five centimeter circle. Blood drained slowly, coagulating about his neck and chest, thin strands of fibrin spiderwebbed from his chin. His rifle lay unused in his lap.

"Gawddamn!" said one of Kagami's men—the one he called Moyers, an obese fellow who wore a rancid yellow bandana about his head. Moyers poked an inquisitive finger into the stagecoach driver's neck. "Got him real good, Sammy."

"Open the coach," said Kagami.

A strong wind blew through the pass; sun carved rock and sand about Kagami as it hung like a washed-out lightbulb in the pale morning sky. Samuel Kagami felt strong also; virile, alive. A thin kid in a vest and rolled sleeves dismounted and flung open the door of the coach.

Kagami gestured at the passengers. "Out."

An older fellow, dressed in frock coat and traveling hat, emerged from the coach. He turned and took the hand of a young woman, a girl actually, not more than sixteen, helping her step down. Kagami eyed the girl; her tight bodice accentuated pleasing curves, smooth lines, and Kagami found himself wondering what would please him most.

"Empty your pockets," ordered Kagami.

"Please," said the well-dressed man, his voice trembling with apparent anxiety. "I am escorting my niece to Sioux Falls, for a recital. I am a music teacher. I have nothing you want."

Kagami said nothing, knowing that his reputation here, in whatever time or place this was, read like a headstone. He could tell, simply by the feel of the Kagami he now was.

The man waited a moment, then fished a leather billfold from his frock coat.

"Toss it."

Kagami caught the wallet and opened it, methodically rifling its contents and tossing them one by one to the ground. The wind caught the paper money which Kagami discarded, and whirlpooled it about the feet of his horse.

"Hey!" cried Moyers, as he raced about gathering the money in his hands. Kagami kept pulling items from the billfold.

"If you'll only tell me what you're looking for, perhaps—"

"Shut up!" barked Kagami. Yes, the feel of this one was superb! This Kagami did not take orders, did not heed warnings. This Kagami strode where he pleased, said what he wished, took as he saw fit. He spat tobacco juice in the music professor's face.

The professor wiped at it with a coat sleeve and clamped his jaws together. Kagami continued sorting through the wallet.



There!

This was what he had come for. He withdrew two theatre tickets and waved them at the professor. "Aha! Ya, boys! Here we go. Ya!"

"But those are simply—"

"I know what they are!" shouted Kagami. He walked his horse closer to the music teacher and drew back his leg, driving his spurs into the man's ribcage. The professor reeled backward and tumbled to the sand. Kagami thought of dismounting and having the girl, there, on the ground, with Moyers and the thin kid laughing and the professor shaking violently. He felt no need in his groin, but reminded himself that if he wished to, he could, and the thought of the professor looking on in silent agony pleased him more than he knew the girl would have anyway.

He studied the tickets.

C-16 and C-17. Seat numbers. *Excellent* seat numbers.

The girl knelt by her uncle and wiped his forehead with the hem of her skirt; Kagami was momentarily intrigued by the pale skin exposed on her calf, the compact breasts bound so tightly within the lace blouse, but . . . no time. No need and no time. He had what he'd come for.

"Do you need to further humiliate us, or may we proceed on our way? It seems, quite inexplicably, that you have what you wanted." The professor's breathing was impaired, his voice undercut by the sound of wind cutting cellophane. Perhaps a rib had been broken.

Kagami spat in the man's face a second time. This time, however, the professor did not wipe away the brownish sputum, but stared into Kagami's eyes through the mucusoid film.

"Get on with you," said Kagami.

The girl helped her uncle to his feet and they both walked, he with a slight limp, to the front of the coach. The mutilated driver was slumped in the seat; the girl, having not yet seen him, raised her hands to her lips and stifled a scream.

"Oh, dear Jesus!" she said. "Is he dead, Uncle Choggy?"

The professor turned and looked at Kagami again. He blinked spittle from his eyes and smiled.

"I'm afraid so, Kate," he said. "This time."

"Is there nothing we can offer you then?" said Chokki. The Neobiotix field representative played with the hem of his shoulder coat, avoiding Kagami's eyes.

"No. I shall continue as a player."

Chokki shook his head, sadly. Kagami offered no brandy, but poured himself a large cup—another large cup—and laughed quietly, thinking that certainly a VSOP cognac from the Israeli National States was far too rare for a Line Nippon.

"You are driving us from business, Kagami san. Do you even realize this?"

"I play for victory. I mean no ill to your company's prosperity."

"Yet we find it difficult to sell neobiotic housing any longer. Your reputation has grown too large, customers will not invest knowing that should you challenge, they must accept, and that you shall ultimately conquer their territories. I myself will be dismissed from my employ unless I bring a satisfactory reply, thus, I have nothing to lose and may speak frankly. Neobiotix shall be pleased to furnish you with a check for any amount you estimate you may win."

Kagami drained his glass.

He had waited impatiently all day yesterday, all morning today, for the referee to declare his turn. There was but one crucial move to be made, and though Kagami did not know yet what it was, he did know how to find out. Chokki was nothing more than an annoying insect buzzing about his ears.

"You," said Kagami, "do not *have* what I may win."

"You have crafted an empire, vaster by far than any in the history of the game. Thus, it cannot be material reward you seek. *What then?*" Chokki seemed to be



shivering; the muscles in his face tightened, no longer the pleasant oval shape it had been. Kagami had never seen the stoic Line Nippon in such an agitated state, and it greatly pleased him. "Do you believe that further victory and ruthless triumph will make you a . . . a . . ."

"Line Nippon?" said Kagami, quickly. "Like you, fat little Chokki?"

Chokki's eyes grew wide with astonishment, his mouth hung open like a sprung trap door. "I . . . I did not mean to say—"

"Damn what you say! You never say what you mean anyway!" Kagami rose from the lioo-chair and stood above the smaller man, at a distance he knew Chokki would find uncomfortably close. The liquor caused him to sway slightly, like a pear tree in the breeze. "How does it feel then, Chokki? *Mr. Chokki*? How does it make *you* feel? *Kokomu*? Surrounded? Yes? Now it is your turn, my little friend. You are the single stone and I the invader."

"Have you lost your wits?"

"Good! No, excellent! My lost wits against yours. Oh yes, you know, don't you, Chokki? You know, and you are there each time. I *see* you, I know it is you. But this time—oh, *this* time little Chokki, I engulf *you*. Or 'incorporate.' Is that a better word?"

"You are mad," said Chokki, softly. He rose and strode toward the front Tō-screen. Kagami followed at his back, his hands waving drunkenly in the air.

"The attacking line, Mr. Chokki! Look out! Here it is—no, there! Now in back of you! Behind you! All about you, ripping into your flesh with pointed politic and gesture, attacking you for what you are, for what you are not, for what you can never be! Do you see it? All around you? Look, my one little stone!"

Chokki touched the Tō-screen and it parted, then he turned slowly to Kagami, standing at the threshold. His composure had not been broken, his face was manicured beautifully, like the Aegean windflowers in the garden,

yet expressionless. His poise caused Kagami to suddenly step back.

Softly, he said, "One stone holds infinite power, Kagami san. One stone may change the outcome of a game. Malicious play extends folly. Good day."

The small Nipponese stepped through the Tō-screen and was gone. Kagami stood in the immense entryway, holding a snifter filled with expensive liquor in a trembling hand.

The train lumbered through the darkness like a huge slug, crawling past mountains and rivers and plateaus. The box-car vibrated and Samuel Kagami rocked in the corner.

"Damn. Aren't you finished yet?"

"Sorry," said the thin man who knelt by the safe, working the dials in the flashing half-light from the car door. "I can't get that last number, it won't open."

"Get the conductor then. Get somebody!" At Kagami's command, the thin man and the heavy-set fellow named Mayor disappeared into the adjoining car. Kagami found a cigarette in the pocket of his black satin vest and lit it, breathing the smoke through his nostrils and releasing it in a dragon flare. He listened to the even, measured sounds of the locomotive pounding track across the Great Divide. The car smelled musty and a chill wind lashed through the cracks in the floorboards, swinging the oil lantern that hung by the door and sparking Kagami's cigarette.

Samuel Kagami was not interested in the contents of the safe. He was interested in the last number.

The two men reappeared holding a frail old gentleman by the arms. The latter did not appear nervous, a grey shoot of hair slicked across his balding scalp, a natty suit and bow tie. "The ticket-taker," announced Mayor.

"Open it," said Kagami in a rush of smoke.

The ticket-taker shook his head.



Kagami smiled, curling and uncurling his fist. Doesn't he think he's just something? thought Kagami. He slammed the old ticket-taker against the wall of the box-car, and the small fellow smacked against the wood then slid down the wall and sat on the floor. He adjusted his wire-rimmed spectacles which sat crookedly on the bridge of his nose.

"I said open it."

The ticket-taker slowly moved his head from left to right.

Stalling. Blind moves. A field mouse roaring at a cobra. Kagami enjoyed the ticket-taker's resistance; it added an extra dimension to the conquest. He brought his foot up neatly in a large arc, directing his boot into the old man's face.

The spectacles shattered in the ticket-taker's eyes, filling them with blood. The dull thud of cartilage breaking and the sharp crack of the glass lenses filled the car.

Samuel Kagami thought of his empire, his kingdom. He envisioned a pebble lodged in its bright machinery, then, with a *whirr* and a *click*, the machinery grinding to a halt.

"Tell me," he said.

The ticket-taker sat very still.

Kagami forced his boot into the man's groin. Now, in the flickering of lantern light, he noticed just how old the man looked; his outfit a remnant of older, perhaps better days, his thinning hair attempting to deny the inevitable baldness of his liver-spotted pate. Were these meager wrappings meant to evoke sympathy? Compassion?

Of course.

Kagami shifted his weight to his left leg and ground the old man's testes between his heel and the floorboards. He felt a popping as he pushed.

"You want to die?"

The ticket-taker spoke in spasmed breaths; his words, though, were calm and precise, as if unscathed by physi-

cal pain. His mouth, a crescent filled with frothy scarlet, opened slightly. "Nothing to lose," whispered the ticket-taker.

*He who has nothing to lose cannot be beaten.*

Another hollow platitude from the mouths of the victors. Yet, for the first time, Kagami felt the awesome might of complete surrender, the carefully maintained power of the ticket-taker's position. Kagami could kill him, or the old man would accept any amount of his beating, but because he held to nothing, the ticket-taker could not be threatened, pressed, taken.

Kagami felt fear, as all about him the machine slowed.

*One stone, Kagami san, may change the outcome of a game.*

Impossible. Kagami had brought to bear a network of holdings so grand that nothing might stop their momentous hurtling toward destiny once they were set into play. Why then did he feel such fright? Why, if the force of this monolith could not be restrained, did he find himself shivering now, staring deep into the eyes of a straw-boned old man?

Blood streaked down the ticket-taker's face like tears. He mumbled.

"What?" said Kagami.

The ticket-taker said nothing. *Your move.* He had heard it clearly enough. It did not bear repeating. Kagami lowered himself to the floor of the box-car and brought his face close to the old man's. His eyes, filmed by a red sauce, held Kagami's unblinkingly.

"It's right to 23, isn't it, Chokki?"

The ticket-taker's lips parted slowly, so slowly that Kagami ached to speed their parting, to reach his hand into the old man's gullet and extract the answer which was rightfully his.

"Please."

The ticket-taker opened his mouth, coughed, and spat two teeth into Kagami's face.



Kagami jumped backward. "Damn you!" He pulled his pistol from his gunbelt and held it level to the ticket-taker's skull. "Now tell me!" Kagami steadied himself on his knees, holding the gun outstretched with both hands. "Now!" The veins and arteries in his neck swelled and throbbed, his skin painted with violet.

"Sammy, don't kill him, boy. He's the only one's got the combination."

Bad lines from a bad script. Kagami ignored the clamor of the men and instead focused all his energies into the barrel of his gun. He held the ticket-taker's gaze and knew that soon, very soon, the bad actors would disappear, begone, there would remain that which always remained: the immovable object and the irresistible force.

But this time the object would yield! It had to!

Kagami cocked the pistol and heard his own breathing, out of control, his heart pounding in his ears. Or was it the train?

"Chokki, I don't want to. Please. What is it?"

His extended arms began to shake, he could not hold the pistol straight anymore and the box-car began to swirl.

"Please!"

The deafening noise of the train and his heart did not hide this fact: the ticket-taker was laughing.

"Chokki!" *Malicious play.*

"Chokki!" *Extends.*

"Chokki!" *Folly.*

Kagami pulled the trigger. His arms recoiled in futile protest. He watched the bullet crawl, painstakingly slowly, across the vast space between himself and the ticket-taker, a space which spanned one meter and three thousand years. The ticket-taker's skull separated as if in slow motion, a dream-jar unwinding at the top, the lid splattered against the box-car walls, small parts of bone and flesh suspended in perpetual ballet, swirling, turning, airborne spinners.

Suddenly, the car was quiet.

"Chokki?" Kagami whispered.

He stared at the ticket-taker's body for a very long time, then slowly, he began to weep. He crawled forward, pulling a leg behind a leg, knee to floor, crawling across that great abyss which lay between himself and the corpse, until he reached the body and hugged himself to the bloodied coat and held and stroked the lifeless hand which he did not need to see to know it wore a single-banded, golden ring.

He pressed himself tightly against the used body, squeezing against its chest, mingling his sorrow with blood and bone, pushing and pushing so that laughter might buoy his heart and one day he might still float free.

And in the night, beyond the slow rumble of the train, empires were falling, vaster than one might imagine.