

A MEDAL FOR HARRY

by Paul Levinson

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"Hai!" The waiter bowed quickly and receded like the warm wind in autumn. Masazumi "Harry" Harihoto knew he would soon have the freshest tekkamaki in New York on his plate. He also knew he wouldn't enjoy a bit of it.

He looked at the rice papers, the rows and rows of crisp, translucent rice papers on his lap, and shook his head. Somehow the neat lasered letters on this ancient kind of paper were out of place. Such letters belonged on screens; the delicate paper deserved the tender ministrations of a pen in hand. The combination of the two -- the government's requirement, its attempt to cling to some tradition in a written realm otherwise given over to virtual glyphs -- made him uneasy.

What the letters said -- the report he would deliver tomorrow -- was even more disturbing.

In fact, it might well make him the most hated person in Japan.

Harry had few illusions, especially about who he was. An unknown, though hardworking, bio-historian. One of many researchers caught up in his nation's obsession to find out why they had become the undisputed global power on Earth by the middle of the 21st century. Computer chips like jewels that made the world run like clockwork; space stations that gleamed in the sky; pearls of bio-mass in the seas to jump-start the food-chain; and all the gems were Japanese.

Oh, everyone knew the proximate reason. The 21st century was the most earthquake prone in recent history. No one knew why. But Japan had finally come up with buildings that stood up to them, a saving interface for cities prone to shake like castanets. "Neuro-spine" construction, the media called it. Grids ran through the centers of buildings with sensors in every room, every tile, every wall, every floor -- self-sufficient networks of such intelligence and interface power that they could change the arrangement of those rooms, tiles, walls, floors literally as an earthquake hit, turn the skyscraper into a lean, tall surfer expertly negotiating the massive waves below, bending here, leaning just right there, so that it stood proud with just a splash or two of water on its face, a pittance from a faucet, when the drum roll was over. Tokyo had been the first to be refitted, rewired in a frenzy, spines inserted, when, as luck would have it, the biggest quake of the century rolled in. The monster from below that almost ate Tokyo. Huge gnashing of tectonic teeth, 9.3 on the scale. And the newly jazzed buildings boogeyed to the beat. Swayed madly like kids to

the rock 'n' roll, dig these rhythms and blues, responding, adjusting to every tremor their sensors reported -- shuffling the deck thoroughly and holding on. And when it was over, the Japanese sun shone down on steel and glass with nary a cracked pane to distort its pure reflection.

And then on to the rest of the world, unable to do anything but cheer and embrace and pay for this astonishing demonstration of Japanese intelligent technology. Forget about cars, computers, holo-screens, even robots and a handful of scientists in space. There were people at stake here -- masses of plain, workaday, food-on-the-table people who quite rightly valued their lives high above any gadget or celestial discovery. And when Japanese algorithms and interface safeguarded the lives of people in San Francisco, Yerevan, Rome, Buenos Aires, when earthquakes in each of these cities and others shook, rattled, and rolled with no fuss, no bother, except to a few pots and pans, their diverse peoples and governments lost all pretension of superiority, even equality, to the Japanese culture. Japan can do it better, why not let it in. Protectionism against what? Our own salvation?

America with its faults and West Coast cities ever at risk was especially grateful, especially receptive.

Nippon was on top, indisputably, at last. Forget hansei -- this was an age of indisputable pride, fulfillment of Japanese destiny. No room for any regret, no place for reflection tinged with even the slightest ambivalence, At least, not publicly.

But success always comes with its thin, inner sister insecurity, Harry and his people had found. Yes, they'd invented a truly breakthrough technology, but why them? To the world they presented a face of only smiling, boundless confidence. But to themselves they wondered: why them? Luck was a poor foundation on which to launch a rosy future. Hard work was more reliable, but not very inspiring when you came right down it no matter what the propaganda said. Not understanding the true source of their achievements led to doubts about whether their success would continue, whether Japan was really the "sun of twenty-one" -- the center and light of human life in the later 21st century -- but most of all, whether the United States of North America, still the second most powerful nation on Earth, might one day come back and reclaim its throne.

Unlike the Euro imperialists of the 19th century, whose power derived from far-flung possessions that got minds of their own in the 20th, the power of America had always come from within, enhanced now by the voluntary inclusion of Canadian provinces and Mexican states and Caribbean islands in the American concordance. This giant was no longer on the cutting edge of anything any more except antique music and movies, but it was still a threat. A dull blade can do much damage.

"Insecurity is spelled with an i-n-U-s," Yamakira had said just last year, "in us, and in U.S." He was the Japanese Freud, so he should know. Far more than Harry, who was paid with a lifetime of job stability and semi-respectability not to know but to do his research. One of many, following a thread.

The waiter appeared again with green tea and a check-screen, out of sight before Harry had a chance to look up and say thank you. He pressed one key for acceptance of the charges, another for the standard gratuity, and sipped the liquid. It felt good on his lips, hot enough to inflame his thermal nerve, not enough to burn.

In a world in which information was everywhere, as ripe for the taking as fruit in an orchard, those like Harry who collected information were low on the pole -- easy come, easy go, like the data they procured, like the waiter with the check. Spin, relationship, position -- wringing meaning and knowledge from the information, tea-like, wine-like, magic-like -- that was the plum job, the one truly worthy of respect.

Yet Harry had found, mostly to his dismay, that sometimes information is so searing that it writes its own meaning, sets its own unalterable spin. He hadn't wanted this task, he reminded himself as he looked at his papers. He hadn't believed for a minute that this path would lead to anything other than another dead end. Yet he had done his duty and performed all the tests as stipulated and compiled the statistics and checked and rechecked his results and he was now sure that what he held in his lap like a burning filament was truth. The figures before and after 1945 were conclusive. The pattern they revealed beyond contention.

And what was he to do with this truth? Simply state it to his audience tomorrow at Rockefeller University, the newly-purchased crown of the Japanese educational system?

For God's sake, the Prime Minister himself would be there!

The Master Spinner of all.

Well, it had gone better than he had expected. No horror, no ridicule, no crowds laughing out loud and hooting him off the stage as his nightmares had proclaimed -- just polite attention, the classic way of his people.

He lay in bed, the earliness of the next morning leaking in the window, wondering where he'd go from here. He stroked Suzie's head as she lay sleeping on his chest. She had soft golden hair, as if woven from the Japanese sun at daybreak. But she was as American as they came. Blond was still the ideal of American culture, for that matter of many Japanese men as well, including Harry. He'd been attracted to her the moment she'd joined his research team in Tokyo three years ago. But he'd kept his distance. Don't mix work with pleasure, mud with rainbows. Builds you nothing but frustration. Who'd have predicted that they'd be in his bed together here in New York City, further away in some ways from her home in Montana than Harry's in Japan. But this was no ordinary work. And the pressure it engendered, well, it brought people together.

"Still mulling over the report?" Her eyelids fluttered open against his neck.

"Yeah," Harry said.

"It's not your responsibility," Suzie sighed, coming more fully awake and confronting what had been their topic of conversation for weeks on end now.

"You're wrong. Of course it is."

She put her lips near his chest, the palm of her hand on his stomach. "You -- we -- collect the data. Make the connections. We can't be responsible for what those in power do with them."

He kissed her head. "That's what scientists have been saying for centuries. Make the connections. Make the theories. Make the weapons. Then log off the project and let the politicians decide what to do with them. But if the politicians use what we give them to hurt people, then it's our responsibility, isn't it?"

"No," Suzie said, "it isn't. Politicians will hurt people, take advantage of people, manipulate them, regardless of what you and I do. That's what they do." She ran her lips and then her tongue across his breast. "The hell with the politicians," she murmured. "Forget about them."

Harry closed his eyes, felt Suzie's warm breath. Politicians had all but completely left the premises of his mind when the phone rang.

"Mmm ... don't answer," Suzie said.

But Harry had to answer, because for him, ever since he could remember, the phone ring aroused that part of his brain which was expecting the most important call of his life.

This time, at last, his brain might have been right.

"It's the Embassy," Harry said, moving Suzie's head from his body to the bed as gently as he could and hustling into his clothes. "The Prime Minister wants to see me there in an hour."

An invitation to meet with the Prime Minister.

This wasn't the classic Japanese way, nor was it an invitation. It was an order. But it was also an honor, a high and rare honor, and Harry was proud.

He looked around the Embassy office. A single blood-red daffodil, forced to blush in a bowl of bone-white stones in March, was the only concession to decoration. This was the Japanese way -- don't crowd your aesthetic palette like a Western omelette, take the time to derive the full amount of pleasure obtainable from the contemplation of a single form. Time enough to replace it when it had exhausted your capacity to see something wondrous in it.

Harry's capacity for such enjoyment had been strained long

before he'd entered the office, had been so for months now...

"The Prime Minister will see you now," the smartly dressed silken haired woman told him. She was beautiful, in a traditional way, but he was too nervous to more than abstractly note it.

"Dr. Harihoto," the PM rose and shook his hand. "Please, sit down."

He was even taller than he looked on full-wall screen -- or at the Rockefeller auditorium yesterday. Some American ancestry there, his political opponents whispered. But this rumor had only increased the PM's public appeal.

Junichi Takahara -- also "Harry" to his close friends, a coincidence that added to Harihoto's unease -- had come to power two decades ago. A national hero, world-wide hero, because he'd had the foresight, the good fortune, to speed the re-wiring of his local Tokyo Prefecture before the 2047 earthquake hit. The Mayor of Tokyo had become the personification of this freedom from the throbbings of the earth; his smile was its emblem. And he was equally adept at taking the pulse of political events and riding them to perfection. The combination had landed him in the Prime Minister's seat -- a seat from which he seemed increasingly willing and able to drive the world.

Masazumi "Harry" Harihoto bowed deeply and sat down.

The PM nodded slightly. "Tell me, Dr. Harihoto, are you surprised that we are not surprised by your finding?"

Tough call, Harry thought. To admit surprise might imply some sort of disapproval on his part -- as if Harry thought that the Prime Minister ought not know such things. On the other hand, to say he was not surprised could give the arrogant impression that Harry already knew the Prime Minister's thoughts. "A bio-historian expects all sorts of possibilities," Harry tried a middle, non-committal course.

"Dammit!" The PM banged his hand on the table. "I want honesty from you, not politeness. This courtesy equivocation is the curse of our country, and it will be our undoing."

"Yes," Harry said carefully. "I understand."

"Please review for me, then, how you came to these conclusions, and tell me how you feel about them -- not as a scientist, but a citizen."

Harry recited the first part of his study. The careful intelligence tests -- not the old Stanford-Binet IQ tests, but new meta-cognitive ones designed by the Tokyo Institute at the turn of the century -- the ones whose political agenda, every psychometrician knew, was to maximize the Asiatic IQ advantage that even the old Stanford-Binet tests had begun to uncover. And then the special algorithmic retro-treatment of the old 1930-1940-1950 IQ scores to make them comparable to the current scores. Followed by exhaustive scanning of current Japanese and Euro-American genomes -- Suzie's specialty -- and comparison of

those with genomes available from the last century. And there was no doubt as to the conclusion: "I'm sure we're dealing with a slightly but significantly and literally different type of human being -- one that first appeared in the late 1940s, and began to reach productive and influential adulthood in the 1970s and 1980s. A tiny but highly potent genetic change. More intelligent than our predecessors, that's for sure. But also more social, more organized, more hardworking, less destructively hedonistic. `Homo sapiens _japanicus_,' as I said in my report."

"Yes," the PM smiled, "that has a ring to it -- but likely not to American or European ears." He laughed in raspy barks -- staccato but not unpleasant to Harry's ears. "Our success in commerce and science, our inventiveness, our leadership of the world community, all neatly explained as a consequence of our being a new human species. Very nice. A powerful, reliable springboard. I like it."

Harry offered a tremulous smile. "Thank you. Though as I said in my report, other cultures in history have had highly inventive phases too. Edison and Bell and the Americans at the end of the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution itself for that matter--"

"Irrelevant to our present situation," the PM interrupted and waved a dismissive hand. "Maybe they were new species too -- no one had DNA scans back then -- maybe the definition of human species needs to be changed. But those 19th-century thrusts have run their course now anyway. What counts is the correlation of your biograms of today's Japanese people with the actual performance of Japan that the whole world has witnessed and applauded."

"Of course," Harry nodded. But to himself he still thought: am I really so much more intelligent than Suzie, so much clearer a thinker and better a worker, as to really constitute a different human species? Hard to definitively say. Even if he and Suzie were close in aptitude, she could still be at the top of her class, and he, well, maybe not at the top of his, and--

"And now the second part, if you please, Doctor."

Yes, the second part -- the 64 million yen question, as they said on the ever-popular quiz show. Discovery of the new cognitive structure was amazing enough. But its source -- that was the atom bomb.

Literally.

"Doctor?"

Harry was sweating. Nuclear weapons were all but gone now -- their removal the pot of real gold at the end of the Cold War, insured by a world willing to make sure that no small bandit nation started producing them again. Nuclear weapons -- the flesh-melting special anguish of the 20th century. The

devil incarnate, the inverse horror lining, of every Nipponese dream. What further damage would his discovery do to this injury that every one of his people carried deep in their souls? What demons was he setting loose?

He and his team had tested their hypothesis very stringently -- on mice, on monkeys, and yes, even on people.

Harry cleared his throat, but his mind was beyond any calming or clarification. He forced himself to speak. "There is no doubt in our findings. Radiation -- of a certain specific kind, a kind engineers call general and high-level and dirty -- was the catalyst for our leap in intelligence."

"Radiation from the Hiroshima bomb," the PM finished the thought.

"Yes."

"Nagasaki too," the PM said. He wanted this spelled out in every excruciating detail.

"Yes."

"That's where the new DNA strands, the first spurts on the intelligence tests, first appeared. Correct, Doctor?"

"Yes."

The Prime Minister nodded slowly and looked at Harry with intense, probing, but approving eyes. Why approving? Why not furious, why not outraged that Harry had located the source of Japanese ascendancy in the charred dead breath of the only atomic weapons ever used on human beings?

"And your view, please, of the impact of this news on world psychology?" the PM prompted.

"Takahara-sama, my area of expertise is not public psychology--"

"Dr. Harihoto! Please do not make me repeat myself. I've already explained that I want your opinion on this as a private citizen! And drop the 'sama' please. I'm not a shogun. I'm not a Lord. I'm Prime Minister, elected by the people's representatives. Much more appropriate to this day and age."

Harry swallowed, said nothing.

"`Sir' will do -- the American way," the Prime Minister said.

Harry swallowed again. "Well, Sir, I suppose in a peculiar way this validates the dropping of the bombs by the Americans. I doubt that such news would be very popular in Tokyo!"

"Indeed," the PM agreed, "much of our country's motivation in the past 100 years has come from a hatred of the Americans for those bombs -- a desire for retribution that was sublimated, thankfully, into healthy economic competition."

Healthy for whom? Harry wondered. For the myriad middle-level workers like him, tantalized by the American cult of individuality on the one hand, obliged on the other to dissolve their individuality into the group good? Obligated by something much stronger than social dictate, obliged by the deeper commandments of genes? Harry shook his head with some bitterness, then caught himself and remade his poker face for the Prime Minister.

Yet his thoughts continued to race. Healthy for the world in some way, maybe. Healthy for those freed of the tithe of earthquakes. But not healthy for his grandparents, who had worked 15-hour days through the 90s, not healthy for his parents either, who had worked till they were too old and tired to enjoy the Spring of the economic revolution they had created. For the Japanese miracle was somehow always more statistical than personal, and even in this great time of Japanese predominance the average American still lived better than his or her Japanese counterpart.

New species indeed, Harry thought sourly. We're no different than the bulk of all other humans in wanting more things than our income can buy. A man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a credit line for -- but then he caught himself again. These were personal opinions, not worthy of the professional bio-historian that he was. But hadn't the PM asked him for just such personal thoughts?

He realized the Prime Minister was talking again. "But what if your discovery led to another conclusion -- an additional conclusion -- one perhaps more palatable to the Japanese public."

"Sir?"

"Well, Doctor, who do you think was really responsible for Hiroshima?"

"I -- well, the American military, of course -- a new President, untutored, under pressure from his--"

"Come, come, Doctor. Don't bore me with the nonsense we feed to our school children. Do you think the American military started the war?"

Harry wasn't sure what the PM was getting at. "No, not literally," he finally stammered. "But they were cutting off our resources and--"

"Doctor, please. You know the answer as well as I. Who started the war with the Americans? There's one, unambiguous answer. Please."

This was something even Japanese historians never talked about. It pained Harry to even think it. But he willed himself to say it. "We did, Sir. At Pearl Harbor."

"Good. Finally some honesty. Now tell me this: If Pearl Harbor was responsible for the war that brought the atomic bombs, and the bombs were responsible for our cognitive edge, is

not Pearl Harbor responsible for our edge?"

"Well, yes," Harry was beginning to see where the PM was going, but wasn't sure if he liked it. "I suppose one could say that in as much as Pearl Harbor started the war that brought the bombs that created the radiated environment that changed our evolution, we as creators of Pearl Harbor are in a sense creators--"

"Yes," the PM interrupted, smiling. "We are the creators of our own destiny! You're beginning to get it, Doctor, good. We, not the Americans, started the ball rolling on this. Your discovery shows that contrary to what all of us have always unconsciously believed, our civilization is not just a reactive, imitative one that somehow managed to get the upper hand. No! We brought our own mastery into being almost entirely on our own! The Americans were the reactors in achievement of our destiny! That's what your painstaking work has shown us. You've brought great honor to your country! I bow to you!"

And, incredibly, the PM bowed, if just slightly.

Harry didn't know what to say. His mind was churning. What a price to pay for destiny, a part of him thought -- the agony, the deaths of innocents, of children in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He couldn't think of anything worse. Anything more nauseating. Yet a part of him felt a perverse itch of pride, of power. And a part of him marveled at that perversity.

The Prime Minister seemed to see all of this in him. "Yes, it feels good, doesn't it? Don't deny it. It feels good. Creators of our own destiny. Scientists -- our scientists, American scientists, scientists all over -- have struggled for decades to improve our species through genetic engineering. But it doesn't work. Evolution doesn't work that way -- can't be trifled with by a cut here, a snip there. Those things work on rice and tomatoes, but don't seem to have lasting effects on our complex human species. But our ancestors triggered a way that worked! They did it the old-fashioned way. By hard work. You change the human genome not by editing it, but the world all around it. Then the world bombards the genes, some of the radiation gets through, some of the genes change, and these genes build technologies that change the world. Make the world safe from earthquakes. The spiral of progress. That's always been the way of natural selection and human technology."

"But our great-grandfathers couldn't have known this would happen when they first attacked the Americans," Harry objected, though impressed by the PM's reasoning. "Surely they didn't intend for the Americans to drop the atomic bombs."

"Irrelevant," the PM gave his dismissive wave again. "Irrelevant what our great-grandfathers did or did not intend. What counts is what they did, how they acted -- and your discovery shows that their actions, their hands, were moved by destiny. The militarism of our forefathers was but the irrepressible yearning of the old species to shed its cocoon and let the new species emerge, to bring that cocoon into the harsh light of day that would burn away the old, and set the butterfly free."

Harsh light indeed, Harry thought, and shuddered as he saw before him the immediate aftermaths of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings that every child at every computer screen in Japan must have seen hundreds of times. For an instant he imagined that maybe what this other Harry was getting at was using the atom bomb again to somehow make the Japanese even more intelligent. Could this PM be so heinous as to contemplate creation of earthquakes worse than earthquakes, hells so hot that they'd burn out even the insulated circuits in the buildings of the world, reducing them to so much rubble like the dumb gaping structures of the past? But no, the PM was a master politician, not a madman, and besides, Harry's report made clear that other background conditions were necessary, industrial pollutants in the air and water that the 21st century had long since cleaned away. No, the spurs of evolution are always multi-factorial, and the irretrievability of some of those factors meant that, even if someone dared to resurrect the decisive factor of the bomb, the emergence of the homo japonicus butterfly was not likely to be repeated or enhanced. The emergence was unique, a one-shot, long-shot odd-ball twist in history.

Emergence of the butterfly -- the PM did have the politician's way with words, even if his metaphors of species phylogeny and individual ontogeny were a bit jumbled. "And will the Japanese public like this?" Harry finally asked, though he knew the answer.

"The shine in your eyes a few seconds ago demonstrated that it will," the PM answered. "We will release your report with the proper spin. And next year, we will begin the rehabilitation of Tojo with a medal awarded to his memory."

"Oh, the Americans won't stand for that," Harry replied, emboldened now that the burden of his delivery to the PM was obviously behind him. "They have a stubborn sense of their own righteous role in history. And even in their weakened condition, we need their cooperation -- their consumption."

The PM smiled his smile. "Really? I think to the contrary that the Americans will more than stand for it -- they'll cheer it. Because your report will not only praise Tojo's role in this, but the American President's as well. And we'll commission, and pay for with great ceremony, a major international medal issued in his honor too. After all," the Prime Minister suddenly produced a small choice bottle of sake and offered Harry a bowl, "your namesake, my namesake, deserves credit for dropping the bombs, for completing the tragedy with an awful final act from which our new victorious age arose. Death when pushed to its limits feeds life. This has always been the way of the universe. He is a hero, however unwitting, in the origin of our new species."

Harry tried to sip his sake. His hand shook, as if the very building they were in were, impossibly, in the palsyng throes of a quake. "You wouldn't dare..." he managed.

"Oh yes. I would. And will. We'll mint a solid gold medal for Harry S. Truman."

