

Part I * Earth

Chapter 1

Tsok!

His *keyaki* wood sword, long and curved and smooth as skin bounced off his master's weapon with a crack that echoed in the semidarkness of the *dojo*. Master and apprentice changed positions within a split second of their swords having touched. Both waited now, testing, their *tabi*-clad feet inching across the *tatami* with the soft rasp of silk against grass.

Tsok!

The master attacked, swinging sharply from his right. The student pushed his sword hilt to the left, bringing the wooden blade up and deflecting the master's blow with ease.

Outside, an early April breeze stirred the first soft cherry blossoms of the young spring. Occasionally a petal floated silently to the still-cold ground.

You must achieve oneness with your sword.

The clear, pure words of Musashi echoed in his mind, riveting his concentration, focusing his vision, freeing his soul. Miyamoto Musashi, Japan's most revered samurai warrior, who killed an opponent when he was only thirteen, who spent a lifetime in battle with his swords, who wrote the definitive book of swordfighting strategy.

Musashi. The Sword Master. *Kensei*.

Tsok!

Their blades collided in a blur.

The predawn coldness permeated the *dojo*. The room was unheated, as it had always been, since that first samurai had grasped a crude bamboo rod to begin the development of kendo swordfighting centuries before. Heat dulled the senses and made the mind lazy. Discipline could not be forged if body and mind were comfortable. The cold kept the mind as sharp as the sword.

Do nothing that is of no use.

Tsok!

He swung low and hard, cutting a swath from right to left in an attempt to scythe the legs of his master. But all he heard was

the muffled swish of his master's robe as the *sensei* sprang quickly away.

He spun around, resuming a defensive position, both hands gripping his weapon tightly. Perspiration covered his face, like dew, but his hands were bone-dry and cool. He had never had problems with slick palms. How many battles had his opponents lost because they had been rendered defenseless by a weak grip?

The faint light from the backlit *shoji* silhouetted the student's lithe figure, isolating high cheekbones into which pitch-black eyes were set in hollow caverns. His hair was closely shaven around the entire surface of his head. Dark fuzz. Not bald, not shiny. A black peach.

Timing is strategy. There is timing in everything.

Tsok!

His master lunged almost directly at him, thrusting straight at his chest. His hands moved instantly up and to the right, together, inseparable, forcing the *sensei's* blade over his head in a harmless carry.

"*Yoshi,*" gargled the master. "You must put every distraction out of your mind, including your opponent. Only his sword exists!"

He jumped back effortlessly, crouched in the defensive position. The *seisei's* skin was white and smooth. His short, wiry body disappeared within his quilted robe.

"*Shitteru,*" said the student, his lips frozen in a determined line. "I know." He shifted his sword to the left hand.

Master and apprentice circled each other, warily. *Sensei* and *deshi*. A living tradition, as old as Japan. The old teach the young. Master leads student. Kendo embodied this tradition more than any other cultural form, descending directly from the art of self-defense so essential for the survival of a proud people from their ancestral beginnings on this lonely island thousands of years ago down to the present time.

But survival meant more than defense. It meant victory. Throughout the centuries, clan against clan, samurai against samurai, Shogun against Emperor, only one would win. Defeat was death. Winning was all that mattered.

Timing of the void is born in timing of the cunning.

Tsok!

He attacked now, breathing in great gulps of the chill air, clearing his lungs of staleness and purifying his mind of every distraction. He swung his sword in a wide arc across the front of his master's body, a slashing blur of *keyaki*. The *sensei* stepped back with his right foot, lifting his blade to foil the blow and spinning quickly to prepare for the next move.

The *deshi's* calf muscles stood out like apples in his hard lower legs, tight and knotty. His lean body showed evidence of little fat. A strict diet of fish and rice, soybeans, seaweed and sake helped to achieve this. A diet he followed religiously. No, not religiously. Militarily.

Know the ways of your opponent.

Tsok!

Shuffling to his left now, he brought his sword up and across, as if to slice the master from right hip to left shoulder. The strength of his effort pulled him slightly off balance, and the master was there in a flash, bringing his own sword down toward the student's left shoulder.

Instinctively, he dropped to his right foot in a crouch, and the *sensei's* sword whispered harmlessly over his head. He could feel the rush of air across his cropped skull. He rose to his feet, sword ready, circling, *tabi* scratching tatami.

He could hear the blood circulating in his head now, felt a rich tingling in his fingertips, the nerve ends sandpapered to sharpness. His sword was light as a pencil. He surged with confidence.

He would win.

The mind is like a teacup: it must be empty before it can become full.

Tsok!

He twirled his body in a quick turn, dropping to a squat position and bringing his sword around in a sweeping motion that clipped the *sensei's* right heel and flung him to the mats.

The student snapped up like bamboo.

His left foot landed on the outstretched sword of his master, pinning it to the tatami, while his own right heel jammed into the *sensei's* chest, forcing the air from his lungs in a painful cry. He pushed his sword tip against the pulsating vein in his master's throat and felt the rhythmic throb vibrate up the wooden blade to his fingertips.

And he waited. Waited for the breath to return to his master's lungs. Waited for confirmation of his victorious thrust. Waited for the concession of defeat.

He had achieved oneness with his sword. He *was* his sword.

He thought of the countless hours of discipline and practice. The patience he had endured through the unforgiving criticism of a *sensei* who never admitted to perfection. The perseverance he had forged from the raw ores of his young body and soul. The selflessness, the devotion, the elimination of every external distraction. The flame of his concentration burned like a laser, fusing fighter and weapon into a singularity of purpose.

"*Sensei*," he hissed.

"What?" A broken voice, barely audible.

"Say it. I want to hear you say it. For the first time. And for the last."

"What?" The master's voice was but a whisper.

"*Shitteru zo!*" said the student. "You know!" His words echoed against the flat walls of the *dojo* as the crack of their swords had earlier.

"I ... concede," murmured his master.

The student's mind exploded in an orgasm of ecstasy. He could hear the blood pounding through his entire body now, flooding through arms, legs, fingers, toes.

If you can persevere, your opponent will be forced to give in.

How true, Musashi! How sweet the taste of victory!

His eyes were wide as saucers, black pits burning in their sockets. A single sliver of sweat ran down the side of his face.

His mind was empty of every distraction. His entire soul focused on that pulsating vein. Yes, defeat was death. Winning was all that mattered.

Perseverance.

Victory.

Survival.

Chapter 2

His name was Fukuda Kenji. The Next Sword-Generation of the Prosperous Ricefield.

He lifted his sword from the *sensei's* neck, edged back several paces on the tatami, and watched his master rise, slowly, painfully, from the mats.

Fukuda Kenji held his wooden weapon stiffly by his side and stood opposite his master, straightening the folds of his robe. His master retrieved his own sword and assumed a similar pose.

Master and apprentice.

Teacher and student.

Sensei and *deshi*.

No more.

The apprentice had absorbed all the master could impart. He was on his own now. He had emerged into a realm where he would have to make his own rules and fight his own opponents, on the strength of his own cunning and character. His face reflected that newly won confidence.

Deshi bowed first, a short, respectful ducking of the head. *Sensei* followed with an equally abrupt nod and turned swiftly on the balls of his feet, disappearing from the *dojo* with a swish of his padded robe.

Fukuda walked to the *shoji*-covered doors and shot them back along their wooden moorings. On the small balcony, he sucked the cold air into his lungs and felt the chill knife into his chest. His exhilaration had nothing to do with ego. He had simply achieved oneness with his sword, as Musashi had preached.

He looked out across the dark courtyard. Blossoms from the lone cherry tree continued their silent descent to the ground.

Darkness. Invisibility. *Invincibility*. The essence of Japan.

Fukuda Kenji was forty-eight years old. He headed the planning division of Matsuzaka Electric Industries – Matsuzaka Denki – the largest industrial conglomerate in postwar Japan, third largest in the world behind IBM and Phillips. The new optical chip project was his responsibility. He had a chip with eyes now, and he didn't want to keep the major waiting...

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