



GHOST IN THE SHELL

STAND ALONE COMPLEX

WHITE MAZE
MUNICHI FUJISAKU A NEW NOVEL BASED ON THE HIT
FILMS AND TELEVISION SERIES!

#05

an original episode of STAND ALONE COMPLEX

The approximation of mobile media to physical human body started with portable, then wearable terminals, and finally settled to implantable terminals which ushered civilization into a new era where man and machine were no longer separate. Such integration was realized by direct transplanting of communication terminals to the physical body, allowing the body and mind to interact immediately with standard computer and network technology. These implantables gradually took over the outdated portable/wearable technology, to be recognized as the prototype of "Cyberbrain."

After the ever-growing technology introduced the practical utility of micro-machines, cyberbrains became both safe and inexpensive. This caused rapid popularization of cyberbrains within countries that had few or no religious restrictions, such as Japan. But the wide prevalence of cyberbrains caused social anxiety: people were exposed to risks of brain-hack because of their neural connection to the entire population using cyberbrains.

The most serious brain-hacking crime was "Ghost Hack," a case where total individuality including past memories and body discretion of a certain person became the subject of the hacker. Various countermeasures were taken, such as the development of numerous protective walls and barriers along with reinforcement of regulations, not to mention security intensification within the neural network system.

But these measures failed to abolish cybercrimes, thus resulting in a rat race: further development of protective walls and barriers, and the emergence of more intelligent and original hackers.

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Junichi Fujisaku

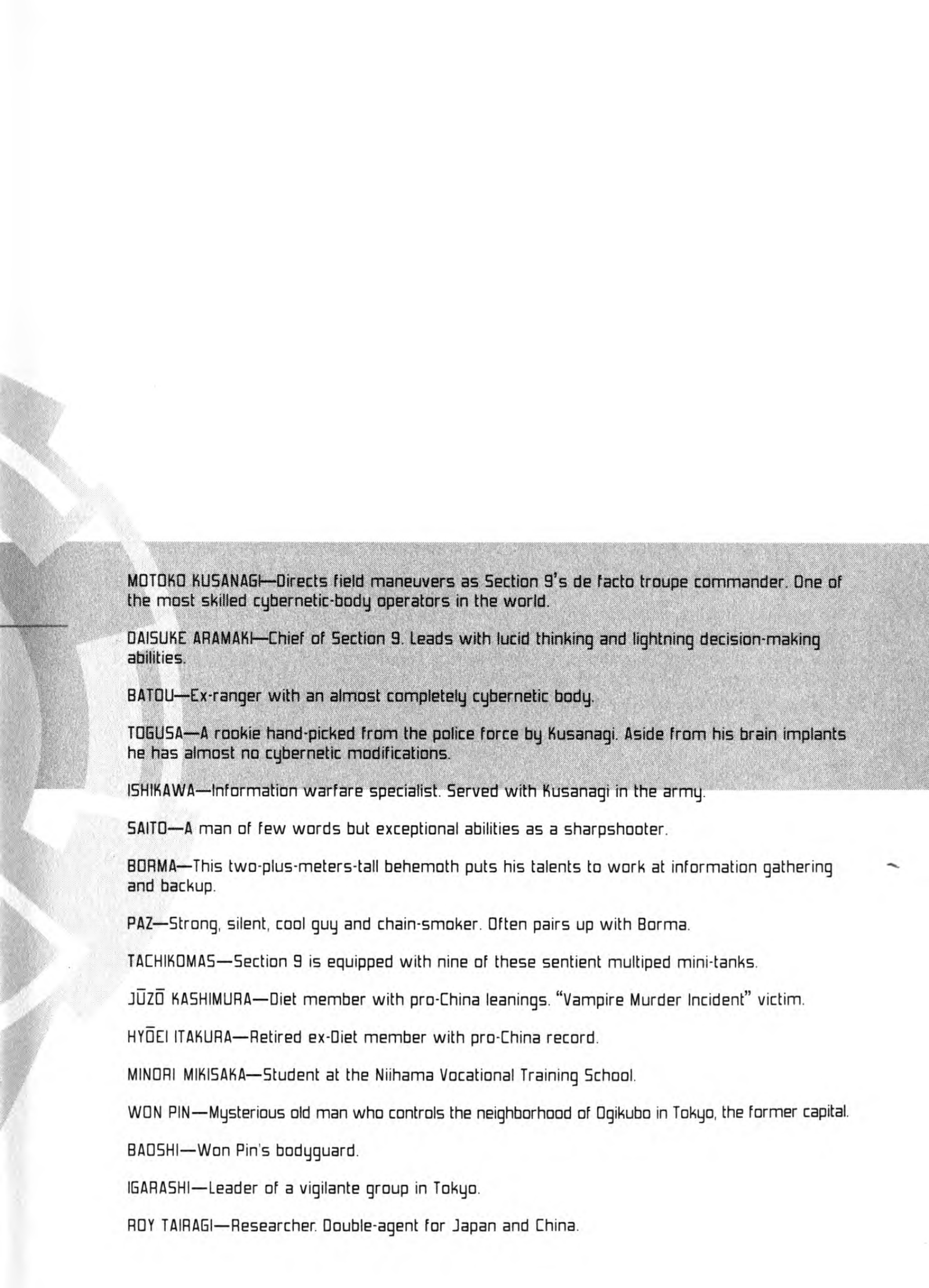
Cover illustrations by

Kazuto Nakazawa and Hiroyuki Okiura

English translation by Camellia Nieh



Milwaukie



MOTOKO KUSANAGI—Directs field maneuvers as Section 9's de facto troupe commander. One of the most skilled cybernetic-body operators in the world.

DAISUKE ARAMAKI—Chief of Section 9. Leads with lucid thinking and lightning decision-making abilities.

BATOU—Ex-ranger with an almost completely cybernetic body.

TOGUSA—A rookie hand-picked from the police force by Kusanagi. Aside from his brain implants he has almost no cybernetic modifications.

ISHIKAWA—Information warfare specialist. Served with Kusanagi in the army.

SAITO—A man of few words but exceptional abilities as a sharpshooter.

BORMA—This two-plus-meters-tall behemoth puts his talents to work at information gathering and backup.

PAZ—Strong, silent, cool guy and chain-smoker. Often pairs up with Borma.

TACHIKOMAS—Section 9 is equipped with nine of these sentient multiped mini-tanks.

JŪZŌ KASHIMURA—Diet member with pro-China leanings. "Vampire Murder Incident" victim.

HYŌEI ITAKURA—Retired ex-Diet member with pro-China record.

MINORI MIKISAKA—Student at the Niihama Vocational Training School.

WON PIN—Mysterious old man who controls the neighborhood of Ogikubo in Tokyo, the former capital.

BAOSHI—Won Pin's bodyguard.

IGARASHI—Leader of a vigilante group in Tokyo.

ROY TAIRAGI—Researcher. Double-agent for Japan and China.

GHOST IN THE SHELL: STAND ALONE COMPLEX
WHITE MAZE

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GHOST IN THE SHELL

STAND ALONE COMPLEX

Part 1

The Sleeping Man's Dream



Chapter 1



Niihama's skyscrapers hovered in the sky like tombstones amid the milky white clouds.

It was a quiet morning.

There was still a little time left before the sun would come up.

In the sky, scattered lights floated like stars.

It was as silent as the bottom of the ocean.

I suppose that makes me a fish, then.

Even as the thought surfaced in Motoko Kusanagi's mind, she realized she was being fanciful. Perhaps it was because she was relying on sight alone to drive the car, without connecting to the Net.

The fog deprived her of her depth perception and limited her field of vision.

According to the speedometer, she was traveling at well over 150 km/h.

She pressed down on the accelerator, plowing still faster and

deeper into the gray mist. Her sense of speed melted away, until she didn't even feel like she was moving forward.

The thick wall of fog blocked her vision, refusing to dissipate.

Beyond it, death waited.

"!"

Suddenly, a pair of red taillights and a dark form leapt into view.

She swerved, dodging the shadow and surging ahead as the truck's horn blasted behind her.

"This isn't like me," she thought self-derisively.

Using vision alone to navigate through such a thick fog was an act of suicide. Why was she behaving like this?

It was probably because she had just recently been re-outfitted with a new cyberbody. In a way, she was testing the reaction speed between her brain and her new body.

But something told her that that wasn't all.

Perhaps it was because of the vision she'd had, during the long rest she had taken when her cyberbrain was separated from her body.

It was a common experience, but nobody knew what caused it. One theory held that it was a type of pattern caused by pseudosignals. Certain religious groups insisted vociferously that such visions came from the world of spirits.

It's not yet my time to join that world.

Perhaps Kusanagi's desire to convince herself of that idea was what made her want to interact with the real world, not the information visible through the Net.

Enough games.

Kusanagi shifted gears mentally and connected her cyberbrain to the Net.

The prefectural police's Highway Observation Network opened in her mind.

Welcome to the sea of information.

Vast quantities of data flooded into Kusanagi's cyberbrain.

In the year 2030, cybernetic brain implants were considered absolutely essential for every member of society. People's thoughts were translated directly into the Net, accelerating the evolution of the High-Speed Information Age. Already, the Net was recognized as constituting a new society that played counterpoint to the real world, occupying an important position in politics, economics, and culture.

Traffic information from the Net projected into the visual field of Kusanagi's cyberbrain, superimposed over the visual information she perceived as she drove.

She could see data pertaining to the cars ahead of her, the vehicles approaching from the sides at intersections, and nearby pedestrians—including personal information.

Of course, drivers' personal information wasn't usually displayed to members of the general public when they accessed traffic information. The information Kusanagi received from the prefectural police Net was classified, available only to law enforcement officers. For a member of Public Safety Section 9, infiltrating the police Net to obtain confidential information was as easy as breathing.

The city was overflowing with all kinds of data. It had the

power to propel and control people. This wasn't an ocean of fog; it was an ocean of information. Constantly in flux, the data fused and divided.

Cyberization—the acquisition of cybernetic brain implants—was simply the result of human beings modifying their own physical bodies to keep pace with these dizzying changes. They were adapting to a new ecological environment: a city steeped in data.

<You're giving off a hell of a lot of static today. What's on your mind?>

Kusanagi's thoughts were interrupted by a cybercomm from Batou, a fellow member of Section 9. Cybercomms allowed direct transmissions between cyberbrains.

Public Safety Section 9 was a counterterrorism agency under the direct jurisdiction of the Prime Minister of Japan. It was designed to function preemptively, intercepting terrorists before they had a chance to act.

Right now, Batou was doing just that, staking out a suspect with Togusa.

"It's the fog. What do you need?"

<Nothing. Just wanted to hear your voice.>

"Now that you've heard it . . ."

Kusanagi was about to close the cybercomm.

<Wait!> Batou stammered hurriedly in her cyberbrain. *<Sorry to bother you with this when you're fresh from the shop, but we have a job for you.>*

"A job?"

<You've heard about the vampires, right?>

"You mean the 'vampire murders' that have been adorning the headlines of the tabloids lately?"

<Have you heard of Jūzō Kashimura?>

"The Diet member?"

<Yeah. He's been killed by a vampire.>

"A vampire?"

<His adopted daughter bit him to death. It's exactly like all the other cases. Someone's family member or loved one suddenly turns into a vampire and bites their neck, killing them. I'm sending you the records right now.>

Batou sent Kusanagi a transmission of data from the scene of the crime.

The video imagery showed an enormous, lavishly appointed room. A man lay on the floor. Humorously enough, he was wearing only his underwear.

So this was Jūzō Kashimura.

The video cut to a close-up of Kashimura's neck. Two bloody holes, approximately 5 mm in diameter, perforated his jugular. The rivulets of blood on his neck had turned dark and dry, indicating that time had elapsed since the wounds were inflicted.

It was just like the other cases.

Four "vampire murders" had taken place in cities near Niihama. In the first incident, a CEO had been found dead in his lover's bed, his blood sucked out through his jugular. The second and third incidents had involved highly regarded professionals who were devoted husbands—a university professor and a

micromachine research engineer—sucked dry by their wives. In the fourth incident, a former secretary of the National Defense Agency was murdered by the woman he lived with.

In each case, the victims were found to have died of cyberbrain death. All of the corpses shared one commonality: their necks were punctured by two 5 mm holes.

According to the police forensics, there was evidence that some kind of micromachine had been washed into the victims through these lesions. It was highly probable that these micromachines had triggered the victim's cyberbrain deaths, but so far, nobody had been able to detect any unusual micromachines in the victim's brains. The police's theory was that after the micromachines were injected, they transformed into a substance resembling the micromachines already present in the victim's cyberbrains.

At the same time, the nature of the assailants made the case even more mysterious.

All of them were the wives and lovers of the victims, and all of them had been the most intimate and beloved persons in the victims' lives.

Hours after the incidents, each assailant had died from a cyberbrain malfunction. Their throats, too, bore mysterious bite marks.

Had micromachines been injected into their necks, too? Had a viral infection in those micromachines driven the assailants to acts of murder? At present, these were the theories the investigators were exploring.

Of course, no virus of this nature had ever been reported in

the past. The very existence of such a virus constituted a threat. Even more public attention was attracted by the fact that the infection wasn't spread over the Net, but was injected through direct bites.

In other words, there might be a real vampire somewhere, capable of transforming people into homicidal monsters who attacked their own loved ones. The tabloids were having a field day.

The circumstances and the nature of the killings led the public to nickname the perpetrators "vampires."

So far, the police investigators had been unable to find any lateral connection between the victims.

"What is this person trying to accomplish?" Kusanagi wondered.

<It's our job to find that out. We've got orders from old Apeface.>

"The Chief?"

<Yeah. I'm already on my way to Kashimura's estate.>

"Roger. I'll be right over."

Kusanagi drove toward the suburbs of Niihama for approximately thirty minutes on the ultraway. After exiting onto an excessively well-maintained system of roads, she turned onto a stone-cobbled street set between hilly slopes of artificial forest.

Eventually, the forest gave way to a residential neighborhood. Its deluxe houses on their vast lots were totally unlike the crowded housing of Niihama. Quite a number of fat cats of the political and business worlds lived in this area.

In front of the gate of a large, traditional Japanese estate, a

familiar yellow car was parked amid the fleet of black-and-white police cars.

Batou's cherished Lancia.

Kusanagi parked behind it and stood at the front gate.

"Is this the place?"

There was no nameplate on the gateposts. Perhaps this was a defensive measure taken to protect the occupant's identity.

Officers in prefectural police uniforms stood guard on either side of the gate. When Kusanagi told them her name and her title, they saluted her stiffly and showed her inside.

The path was made of stepping stones set in pea gravel. Kusanagi walked down them toward the mansion.

On her left, she could see a serene Japanese garden. A forest of bamboo surrounded mossy rocks, imbuing the garden with a feeling of depth. If there hadn't been a murder to investigate, she would have felt drawn to stroll through it.

At the end of the path, a huge man in a bomber jacket stood at the front door, looking out of place amid the elegant surroundings.

The man had artificial eyes with tubular lenses installed in both eye sockets.

Section 9's Batou.

"The cops have already gone around touching things and making a big mess," he told Kusanagi.

"Do we really have a vampire on our hands?" she asked.

Batou shrugged. "Come have a look."

He entered the front door.

The front entryway was littered with the shoes of police detectives.

Batou moved them to make room for his own boots, which he unlaced and removed before stepping up from the dirt floor of the entryway onto the floorboards. Kusanagi did the same.

They moved from the entrance hall into a string of Japanese rooms with tatami mat floors. The rooms were divided in the traditional way, with sliding *shōji* screens made of bamboo and rice paper.

"Where's the crime scene?"

"This way." Batou led the way and Kusanagi followed.

They exited the reception rooms and crossed an open wooden walkway overlooking the garden. It led to a detached annex in the back that was concealed by the stands of bamboo.

Batou opened the sliding door.

A man and woman lay dead on the floorboards.

The man was middle-aged and bald, and he lay in the same position as in the image Batou had sent. Jūzō Kashimura.

Lying dead in nothing but a pair of underpants—so much for the dignity of a Diet member.

Kusanagi peered at his neck and found the bite marks.

"Same MO as the other vampire incidents. He probably died of cyberbrain death. We'll know more when we have the results of the police autopsy," Batou said.

"I see."

Nearby, a half-naked woman lay on the floor. A girl, really—she appeared to be in her teens.

"That's Akiko Kashimura, the assailant. She was his adopted daughter. Looks like maybe she was more than just a daughter to him," Batou added, as if reading Kusanagi's mind.

"It was a well-known secret that Kashimura was into this kind of thing. Looks like his daughter attacked him right when he was getting ready to have some fun."

Kusanagi approached Akiko's body and examined her throat. Sure enough, it was punctured by two holes.

Kusanagi shrugged and turned back to Kashimura's body.

"Jūzō Kashimura, huh?"

She gazed down at the corpse of the man nicknamed "Slugger" in the political world.

Kashimura had been heavily involved with refugee issues and the search for people who had gone missing during the war, and was known as an important bridge-builder in Japan's relations with China. From what Kusanagi heard, he was a very popular politician.

Superficially, Sino-Japanese relations appeared peaceful, like friendly neighbors dining together at the same table. But under the table, the two nations were kicking each others' shins over the Okinawa Incident and refugee issues.

In particular, many people still suspected Chinese involvement in the nuclear attack that had obliterated Okinawa during the Great War. In recent years, terrorist attacks by armed Anti-China extremists were becoming more commonplace.

Kashimura took a strong pro-China stance, staunchly maintaining his public stance that the Okinawa Incident had been an accident.

He had many enemies.

"The anti-China faction was after him, weren't they?" Kusanagi said.

"Sure. But do you really think they'd go to such lengths?" Batou questioned.

"We can't rule it out," she said.

"True. That's probably why the chief sent me here. The Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs is planning to visit the graves at the Kagoshima Memorial again, right? All of Section 9 is getting roped in because the anti-China faction is so riled up. Of course, we need to do whatever we can to prevent attacks before they happen. Right now, Togusa and the Tachikomas are staking out the faction's headquarters in Niihama. Togusa was grumbling about not having seen his wife and daughter in three days."

"Has the faction made any moves?"

Batou shook his head.

"The only information we've acquired is that they're planning an attack to coincide with the Vice Minister's arrival in Japan. Both Kashimura and former Diet member Itakura have received threatening letters."

"Itakura?"

"Hyōei Itakura. Like Kashimura, he's a big name in China relations."

"And the anti-China faction is threatening him?"

"Yeah. Anyway, Togusa and three Tachikomas are monitoring them."

"Sounds fishy."

"Yup."

“Batou, I’d like you to swing by the prefectural police and pick up the autopsy results,” Kusanagi said as she headed for the door.

“Where’re you going?”

“Itakura’s place. For some reason, I’ve got a funny feeling about this.”

Chapter 2



Kusanagi left Kashimura's mansion and drove toward Itakura's residence.

She would have to handle this delicately.

For now, the best approach would be to keep a discreet eye on him.

The Vampire Incidents.

Kusanagi never thought she'd be involved with something like this.

Where to start?

Should she look into whether anyone bore any grudges toward the victims? Re-examine the previous incidents? Try to identify the mysterious micromachines?

The things that needed to be clarified were as infinite as the stars.

It was as if she were surrounded by fog.

In fact, she literally *was*.

Even though the sun had already risen, the haze that shrouded the city still refused to dissipate.

It would probably lift soon . . .

But this case won't be as easy to clear up.

Just as the thought entered Kusanagi's mind, a black shape sprang in front of her car.

A person?!

Kusanagi slammed down on the brake pedal with her left foot.

Her body was flung forward against the seat belt.

The sudden stop made the tires lose their grip, and the car spun out of control. Kusanagi's visual field went into rapid flux, and she was assaulted by a violent lateral gravitational pull.

Amid the whiteness, her tires emitted a shrill squeal.

The person lay flat on the road.

The car skidded sideways directly toward the human form.

Kusanagi's fingers deftly maneuvered the steering wheel. With minute adjustments, she regained control of the car and began to veer away from the motionless person.

When the car had made a complete 360 degree turn, it finally came to a stop.

The foggy city was silent once more.

It seemed even quieter than before.

Kusanagi let out a sigh and then eyed the form in her rearview mirror.

It was motionless.

"But I'm sure I dodged it . . ."

Kusanagi recalled the rumors about "Road Killsters" trying to acquire cybernetic bodies. It was a common tactic among im-

poverished homeless people who needed to replace their old cyberbodies. Of course, few drivers would actually get out of their cars and agree to compensate such people.

Kusanagi opened the car door and got out. Just in case, she took her automatic Sebro M5 and approached slowly.

She could see the person better now.

It was a young girl wearing a rough stadium jacket and a miniskirt. She was lying face down, so Kusanagi couldn't see her face.

Her Sebro still at the ready, Kusanagi gingerly turned the girl over.

She looked around fifteen or sixteen years old. Her face was heavily made up, but her features were still childlike. Her body appeared to be flesh and blood, and she didn't seem to be concealing any dangerous weapons.

"Ooooh . . ." The girl let out a small moan, opening her eyes a crack.

"You don't look like a Road Killster."

Kusanagi holstered her Sebro and crouched next to the girl. The girl's lips were moving faintly. She was saying something, but Kusanagi couldn't make it out.

"What?"

Kusanagi leaned her ear closer to the girl's mouth.

" ee"

She could just barely hear the girl now.

Kusanagi took the girl in her arms and brought her ear even closer. She could feel the girl's breath on her cheek.

"What is it?" Kusanagi asked.

The girl reached her arm under Kusanagi's arm and around her back, clinging to her.

"H-hey!" Kusanagi began to pull away, but the girl's body trembled.

Kusanagi put her arm around the girl's back. She seemed terrified, in need of support.

Just then, Kusanagi felt a blast of warm breath against her neck.

She looked down just in time to see the girl's mouth open wide, about to drive her teeth into Kusanagi's jugular.

"!"

Kusanagi thrust the girl away with all of her strength.

The girl rolled on the asphalt. As she rolled, she flailed her limbs against the road, baring her teeth like an animal and glaring menacingly at Kusanagi through unfocused eyes.

She sprang at Kusanagi.

Kusanagi could have stopped her easily with her Sebro.

But these were high-speed armor-piercing bullets with the force to penetrate a cyborg's skin and destroy its internal workings. The body of a flesh-and-blood girl would never withstand the impact. She would be instantly killed.

Kusanagi pivoted sideways, dodged the charging assailant.

As the girl passed in front of her, Kusanagi hooked the girl's arms in her own, immobilizing her. She jerked the girl toward the ground and pinned her to the pavement.

Beneath her, Kusanagi could hear the girl's animal growl.

The girl writhed, baring her fangs and struggling to twist her body.

Kusanagi pulled out a cyberbrain lock and stabbed it into the QRS plug implanted in the back of the girl's neck.

The cyberbrain lock was a humane restraint device designed to immobilize people with cyberbrains. It dominated the brain's motor center without inflicting physical damage, paralyzing the subject while maintaining their fundamental vital functions. It was a technology made possible by the fact that the installation of a cyberbrain was the norm in society.

The girl's body stiffened momentarily, then quickly softened.

When the girl fell limply to the ground, unable to move, Kusanagi finally relaxed her tensed joints.

She looked down at the unconscious girl lying in the road. The visage of a bloodthirsty beast had vanished, and her face had regained the childlike softness of an adolescent.

Kusanagi's gaze rested on the girl's neck.

It was punctured by two holes.

Kusanagi pulled back the girl's lips, revealing a pair of gleaming sharp fangs.

You, too?

She was a vampire.

But why had she attacked Kusanagi? The girl was a complete stranger. Weren't the assailants supposed to target the people closest to them?

Kusanagi opened the cyberbrain lock's expansion terminal, pulled out a connective cable, and linked the girl's cyberbrain to her own.

The cable allowed her to immerse her consciousness in that of another person.

It felt like sinking down toward the bottom of an ocean.

The deeper she went, the more the pressure increased. Without Kusanagi's comprehensive system of safeguards, the massive quantities of data would have overwhelmed and crushed her.

She was also vulnerable to the effects of any malicious cyber-brain viruses infecting her host.

Were these incidents—and this young girl's crazed, vicious behavior—the result of a virus that turned human beings into vampires?

Kusanagi had the key resources to solve that riddle right in front of her.

When she penetrated the ghost line at the perimeter of the girl's cyberbrain, she was suddenly overcome by a strange wooziness.

A cyberbrain drug.

Cyberbrain drugs were programs that triggered effects similar to those of traditional drugs, which derived their chief constituents from plants or chemical substances. They were easy to acquire on the Net, and with antidote drug programs, users could instantly nullify the drugs' effects.

Initially, cyberbrain drugs had been developed as painkillers, to be used exclusively in medicinal settings and on the battlefield. But when young people discovered the feelings of euphoria and intoxication the drugs could elicit, a variety of degraded knock-offs began to circulate, designed solely to provide such effects. Their proliferation had become a major problem in society.

This girl was probably using one such product.

Kusanagi extracted an antidote drug program from the Net and released it into the girl's cyberbrain.

Gradually, the woozy feeling dissipated, and Kusanagi's senses regained their clarity.

As if a fog had lifted.

Kusanagi turned her attention to the girl's memory field. She had to find out what had happened to this girl.

But the state of the girl's cyberbrain was unlike anything Kusanagi had anticipated.

It was as if Kusanagi had wandered into a vast, empty room.

No memories?

The girl's past was missing.

She still had memory based on instinctual experience—the capacity to act on desires or urges. Her linguistic field was also intact.

But she was missing her personal memories.

She would be able to go on living. But without a past.

There was also evidence of mental coercion.

It was fragmented, and only the barest residual thoughts remained.

Carefully, Kusanagi gathered the pieces and reassembled them. Normally, this would be done by a team of ten or more cyberbrain engineering specialists over a period of days, but Kusanagi was able to perform the task alone in a minimal amount of time.

This was why Motoko Kusanagi was considered to have talents that ranged into the supernatural.

The reconstructed memory was complete.

Instantly, a totally unfamiliar city street appeared before Kusanagi.

Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street.

The letters adorned an arching sign.

Where was this?

The scene disappeared, and just one simple thought remained.

—*Hatred.*

The hate was connected to a brief, solitary command.

—*Bite and kill.*

A specific face was associated with this hatred. Kusanagi had seen it somewhere before.

Kusanagi searched her own cyberbrain for the corresponding person.

Hyōei Itakura . . .

It was the man Batou had said the Anti-China militants were targeting.

. . . Vampires are after Hyōei Itakura?

Kusanagi cybercommed Section 9.

“Kusanagi speaking. Find out if there have been any incidents associated with former Diet member Hyōei Itakura.”

<Roger.> An inorganic voice responded. It was one of Section 9’s android operators. <Other than the threat letter he received, at present, there is no data indicating that Hyōei Itakura has been involved in any kind of incident.>

"Roger. Just in case, assign all of our unoccupied agents to investigate anything connected to him."

<Is this authorized by Chief Aramaki?>

"I'll speak to him. This is top priority."

<Roger.>

Kusanagi withdrew from the young girl's cyberbrain and returned to reality.


Somewhere in this mist, something was still afoot.

The dense shroud still covered Niihama City, refusing to lift.

Once more, Kusanagi opened her cybercomm circuit and transmitted to Section 9.

"Put me through to the chief."

Chapter 3



When Kusanagi entered the room, Daisuke Aramaki looked up from the documents on his desk.

As Section Chief, Aramaki was the leader of Public Safety Section 9.

He was middle-aged and half-bald, but everyone in Section 9 held deep respect for their leader.

Aramaki had built Section 9 after working for the Public Safety Department and the Land Self-Defense Force Intelligence Department, and was endowed with an intense commitment to justice. As such, he also had many enemies. Still, he pursued his ideals with a fearlessness that awed Kusanagi.

"As per your request, I've assigned Paz and Borma to discreetly watch over Itakura. So far, they've had nothing to report."

"Good. Sounds like they made it in time."

"Where's the girl you took into custody?"

"I left her with the Red Suits. They're examining her cyber-brain, but I doubt they'll find anything."

"Just the urge to kill Itakura, hmm?"

"Yes. But for some reason, she attacked me instead. It's probably this so-called Vampire Virus, but we won't know anything until we get the lab report."

"If a virus caused this girl to attack you, perhaps the assailant in Jūzō Kashimura's murder was infected with the same type of virus."

"But the fact that Akiko Kashimura committed the attack is significant. She had the ability to get close to the victim without arousing suspicion. From what I hear, he was very fond of his adopted daughter—he brought her to live in his home and visited her bedroom every night."

"Are you suggesting that this girl you've brought in shared a similar relationship with Itakura?"

"No. I checked on the Nets devoted to that underworld, and found no connection between Itakura and Mikisaka—the girl I apprehended."

Kusanagi's attacker had been carrying an I.D. that identified her as Minori Mikisaka, age fifteen, a student at the Niihama Vocational Training School.

Other than that, the only notable item they had found on her was a membership card with the logo of a place called Club Nosferatu in downtown Niihama.

If Itakura had shared Kashimura's predilection for underage girls, that might have been a good starting point for their investigation. But that didn't seem to be the case. Itakura lived a frugal life with his wife and three daughters, sending donations to war orphans every year.

"From what I understand, he's very well connected when it comes to China relations," Kusanagi said. "During last year's summit, the Chinese head of state came to pay his respects to Itakura even before he visited the Prime Minister, right?"

"That's right. Some even say that China's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs' upcoming visit to Kagoshima wouldn't have been possible without Itakura's efforts. It's no wonder the anti-China militants are after him."

"The only people who have a motive to kill Itakura are the anti-China militants. That would mean that they're the ones creating these vampires."

"But this case is different from the other Vampire Incidents we've seen," Aramaki pointed out.

"True. I wonder why Mikisaka was chosen to attack Itakura?"

"The other agents can keep an eye on the anti-China militants. I'd like you to investigate the girl, Major. See if you can find a link to Itakura."

"No post-maintenance rest time?"

"Didn't you get plenty of rest while you were being re-outfitted?"

"Rest and dormancy aren't the same thing. Oh, never mind. I'll find out what I can about this Mikisaka girl."

Club Nosferatu was located in an older district not far from Niihama's downtown area. Mikisaka had visited the club just eight hours before her encounter with Kusanagi.

"Er, is Meeko in some kinda trouble, officer?"

Evidently, Mikisaka had gone by the name Meeko at the club.

The manager of Club Nosferatu was as skinny as a grasshopper.

Kusanagi could feel him staring at her cleavage, which peeked out of the top of her leather bustier. Apparently, it didn't matter to him that her body was prosthetic. Kusanagi had heard that some men had cyborg fetishes.

She eyed him coldly. She'd hidden the fact that she was from Section 9, claiming instead to be a police detective, and had entered the club just an hour before closing time, when the sun was already low in the sky. Her outfit wasn't very police-like, but the man hadn't said anything. He probably wasn't thinking about anything but her body.

"I don't intend to interfere with whatever goes on at this establishment. I just want to know what Meeko did here, and who she was with."

"Uh-huh."

The man's response was non-committal. Meeko had probably been meeting up with a cyberbrain drug dealer. To acknowledge that would be to openly admit that illicit drugs were bought and sold at this club.

The club probably got a cut of the dealer's profits in return for access to its clientele, and that money probably lined the pockets of this grasshopper-like man. That symbiotic relationship was probably what was making him so tightlipped.

Kusanagi didn't have much patience for his kind.

But if she escalated the situation too much, she might end up losing a possible lead.

It occurred to Kusanagi that she should have brought Togusa. A former police detective, Togusa was excellent at investigations that required a lot of patient interviewing.

Kusanagi relaxed her tense shoulders and gave the club a once-over.

The main room was a hall large enough to accommodate two hundred, with various light fixtures installed in its high ceiling. A video screen was mounted on one wall—they probably played videos to go with the music.

The gallery space that overlooked the hall was reserved for VIPs, furnished with leather sofas and tables, with partitions to divide the space between each seating area. Right now, Kusanagi was standing in one of these spaces. From here, she could see the entire establishment.

She checked the room for surveillance cameras.

There were two cameras in each of the four corners, as well as in the center of the room and both inside and outside the entrance.

There was also a camera underneath the floor of the dance hall.

To view the footage, it would probably be quickest to break into the club's Nets and get it for herself.

"Just one more thing," Kusanagi purred, taking an entirely different tone now as she slowly uncrossed and re-crossed her legs.

"Wh-what is it?" The man's eyes gyrated wildly. He leaned in closer to her.

"How would you like to see a little more of me?" Gently, Kusanagi tugged her bustier down lower, revealing even more of her breasts.

The man swallowed loudly.

"Mmm, but you know how I really like it . . ." Kusanagi purred, extending a connective cable from the back of her neck and offering it to the man.

Cyberbrain sex was a way of having intercourse on the cyber-brain level, without physical contact. Since it allowed people to easily transcend their physical limitations, people of any age or gender could share pleasure. But because of that same absence of physical constraints, in extreme cases the activity had been known to cause cyberbrain death.

The man snatched the cable greedily and jammed it into his own QRS plug. He was like a starved animal—exactly the kind of pervert who'd install a camera in a dance floor.

"Sweet dreams," Kusanagi said as she fed the man a customized pseudo-memory.

It was a specialty item ordered from a backstreet purveyor.

The man's excitement was visible through his trousers.

He'd probably climax in less than two seconds.

Meanwhile, Kusanagi extracted the control code of the club's security system from his cyberbrain. It took her about a second.

She removed her cable from the man's neck and with a light kick sent him toppling over. Still lost in a dream world, the man fell to the floor, a look of pure ecstasy plastered across his face.

Without so much as a glance, Kusanagi got up from the sofa and left the club.

As she climbed the stairs up to the street from the underground club, the sun was already setting. Illuminated by its final rays, the buildings cast long shadows across the asphalt.

In the shadows, the enormous man waiting for Kusanagi wore a displeased expression.

At first glance, his face looked fearsome enough to belong to the club's bouncer, but something about the tubular lenses of his eyes conveyed an indescribable charm.

It was Batou. "Don't you think you were a little too generous in there?"

"Why, were you worried about me?" Kusanagi replied.

"Who, me?" Batou looked at her glumly.

"I got what I needed," she said, pointing to her head.

While leaving the club, Kusanagi had pulled down the images from the security cameras in a split second. Of course, she had also washed in falsified data of an alternative identity, to replace the record of the time she'd spent there.

Kusanagi got into the driver's seat of her parked car and replayed the footage from the security cameras. Batou linked up and watched with her.

The footage was from three nights ago. Meeka, AKA Minori Mikisaka, was leaning against the wall, dressed in the same clothes she had been wearing when Kusanagi had encountered her in Niihama. She checked her watch repeatedly.

<She's waiting for a guy—you can tell by her face.> Batou's voice reached Kusanagi by cybercomm. Every so often, the girl glanced toward the entrance. She had no idea of the tragedy that awaited her in a matter of hours. *<Must be the rat who turned her into a vampire.>*

"Perhaps."

<But what's the sense in making a vampire out of this girl? She's got no connection to Itakura.>

"That's true—I wonder about that, too. But the assassination thought pattern left in this girl's brain was pointed at Itakura."

In the security camera footage replaying in their visual fields, Kusanagi and Batou watched as Meeko's face brightened.

A man stood with his back to the security camera.

He was tall and thin. Half of his face was concealed behind a hat and a sunglasses-type terminal.

Meeko linked arms with the man and left the club, smiling. They saw her cross the security cameras at the door.

The two figures soon disappeared down the darkened street.

Kusanagi left the Net and returned to reality. The same darkened street stretched out before her.

"Are you going looking for that guy?" Batou asked her from the passenger seat.

"Yes. It's quite possible that he's the one who gave the vampire virus to Mikisaka and Kashimura's adopted daughter. I'll track him down. You investigate how the case relates to the anti-China militants that were threatening Kashimura."

"Investigate? This is just someone trying to make it look like it's the anti-China faction."

"Then your assignment is to find out who would want to do that."

With that, Kusanagi got out of the car.

Batou stuck his head out of the window and called after her.

"Where're you going?"

"I'm going vampire hunting."

She strode toward the dusky city.

The sidewalk was paved with concrete blocks.

Mikisaka had walked down the same street, but that memory was now lost to her. Had it ceased to exist altogether? Or did some form of it still remain?

It occurred to Kusanagi that having lost her physical body and become a complete cyborg, the only thing that connected her to her former self and defined her identity was her memory—her past. If she lost that, she would cease to be Motoko Kusanagi.

This was precisely why people find the past comforting. Everything that defines the self resides in one's history. People even try to imagine their futures based on the past.

But Kusanagi wasn't overly concerned with the past or the future.

Decisions could only be made in the present, not in the past. The future was no more than the consequence of those choices.

Chapter 4



Kusanagi followed the road through Old Niihama and came to a steep street that led into the hills.

Beyond it, there was a residential neighborhood—Kusanagi knew this information from the map she'd acquired on the Net.

Halfway up the street, she could see a small park.

The streetlight at its entrance gave off a white glow. Above it, there was a small security camera. It had been installed to watch the children as they played, enabling the neighbors to monitor the park remotely.

Even though the neighborhood was removed from the downtown area, nowadays nobody let their children wander around alone and unprotected. The security camera was a relic from the days when this neighborhood had been relatively safe.

Kusanagi connected her cyberbrain to the terminal at the base of the camera.

Three days ago.

The terminal's records contained the images Kusanagi was looking for.

Minori Mikisaka and the man.

They walked up the hill, past the park.

Mikisaka lived in the dormitory of the vocational school she attended. The dorm was near the ocean, on the other side of downtown Niihama.

Kusanagi gazed up at the top of the sloping street.

The white halos of streetlamps dotted the road. The houses lining the street were already visible only as silhouetted shapes in the darkness.

She began to climb the hill.

This must be near . . .

Kusanagi connected to Section 9's Nets, pulling down data related to her realization.

Then she called up a map from the neighborhood Nets and layered it with the data from Section 9. The headquarters of the anti-China faction, currently under watch by Section 9 in anticipation of the upcoming Chinese Vice Minister's visit, was a short distance from her current location.

She cybercommed Section 9.

"Code KN. Niihama suburb BW846. Who's in concert tonight?"

<T's in concert at BW846.> The voice of the Section 9 operator sounded in Kusanagi's head.

BW846 was a code for the current operation, the stakeout of the anti-China faction base. Code KN meant Kusanagi, and

Code T referred to Togusa. "In concert" was code for "conducting surveillance." When Section 9 wasn't using special encrypted circuits to ensure the security of their communications, these coded exchanges were the agents' lingua franca. In metropolitan areas like central Niihama, the Public Safety Surveillance Network allowed them to hold fairly normal conversations. But this neighborhood was in Old Niihama, and there was a risk that any wireless communications might be intercepted.

"Togusa is playing, huh? Code KN, Player T. BW846, requesting ticket."

<Code T. Tickets available.> Togusa's response came in.

"One, please."

<Roger.> Along with his response, Togusa sent the coordinates of the location where he was staked out.

Rather than heading straight to the indicated spot, Kusanagi went past it once first to make sure nobody was tailing her.

The coordinates pointed to a nondescript two-bedroom home.

From a second-floor window, Togusa used a surveillance device to monitor the comings and goings on the fourth floor of an old apartment building two doors down.

Kusanagi stood behind him.

"What are the anti-China militants up to?"

"Nothing, so far. All I can see is the building entrance, the hallway, and the door. The only person who goes in and out is their gopher."

"Who's tailing the gopher?"

"Three Tachikomas are on support duty outside.

<Who knows what would happen if we let Togusa to handle everything alone!>

<That's right! And now he doesn't have Batou along to baby-sit him!>

<He'd be helpless without us!>

Cybercomms from the Tachikomas flashed in on Section 9's shared circuits.

Section 9 was outfitted with mini-multiped tanks called Tachikomas. Originally, they were supposed to be used as a sort of armor, carrying agents in their rear pods. But their artificial intelligence evolved as they accrued experiences, and they had developed the capacity for autonomous behavior. Because they were far more curious than they were task-oriented, however, it was difficult to use them for anything beyond operational support.

<He can hold his own when it comes to double-talk, though!>

"Where's the big guy, Major?" Togusa asked.

"I saw him just a little while ago, but I don't know where he is now."

Togusa shook his head. "That's just great. He's supposed to relieve me in two hours. How come I ended up doing all of the surveillance? Anyway, what are you here for, Major? I don't suppose you're here to take Batou's shift for him?"

"Sorry. I'm here for the records you've acquired during your watch."

Kusanagi connected the surveillance device to her cyber-brain and extracted only the records from three days prior, but

there was no data containing images of Minori Mikisaka and the man.

Wasn't he connected to the anti-China faction?

Kusanagi headed for the door.

"Leaving already?"

"I've got a lot to do."

"Just when I thought I'd have someone to talk to."

<But you have us, Togusa!>

"And risk having someone tap the conversation?" Togusa answered sarcastically.

<Batou says that talking is the foundation of love!>

"That's only true in his case. Usually talking is the foundation of misunderstanding."

<But Togusa, love is the reason Batou gives us oil!>

"Admit it: you're really just after oil, not love!" Togusa accused.

"In any case, I have no interest in chatting with machines."

<Ha! As if a human being could even understand the encrypted cybercomms we exchange with our state-of-the-art AIs!>

"Oh, pipe down!" Sighing, Togusa looked up at Kusanagi as she left. "Can't you say something to them, Major?"

"Let them talk," she said.

Togusa groaned.

<Togusa! Togusa!>

"I thought I told you to pipe down!"

<No, listen! I've spotted a suspicious person!>

Hurriedly, Togusa peered into the surveillance device as Kusanagi came back into the room and connected her cyberbrain to the interface.

Her visual field synchronized with that of the surveillance device.

At the same time, footage from the supporting Tachikoma opened in her cyberbrain.

One of the videos was of a man coming down the road. He had on sunglasses and a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes. He wore a rough-looking stadium jacket and jeans.

It was him.

Kusanagi lined it up in her cyberbrain with the image of the man who had disappeared into the residential neighborhood with Mikisaka.

He was dressed differently, but he had the same walk and the same basic qualities.

The man in the baseball cap climbed the stairs toward the anti-China faction's headquarters on the fourth floor.

"Togusa, have you seen this guy before?" Kusanagi asked.

"No. He's a new face."

The man reached the fourth floor and nonchalantly entered the door to the Anti-China faction's base.

So he was one of them after all.

Just then, an anti-China militant with a shaved head came bursting through the door.

Frantically, he tried to distance himself from the door as the man in the baseball bat emerged from inside and aimed a large automatic gun at him.

Kusanagi disconnected from the surveillance device. Her visual field showed the reality in front of her again.

"Togusa! Stay here and tell me what happens."

Without waiting for a response, Kusanagi leapt straight down from the second-story window.

A gunshot emanated from the apartment building.

Using the maximum power output her cyberbody allowed, Kusanagi leapt up onto the roof of the house next door.

<Major, he's getting away!> Togusa's frantic voice echoed in her cyberbrain.

"Tachikomas! One of you go after the man, the others secure the anti-China base! Togusa, link the surveillance device footage to the Net."

<Roger!>

Kusanagi leapt from rooftop to rooftop, monitoring the man's position through the relayed surveillance device footage.

<Major! There are a bunch of dead people in the group's base!>

"Reference the corpses' identities in the Public Safety Data Net!"

She leapt over a rooftop to the street below. Now she could see the man in the baseball cap, running down the road.

He noticed her.

Kusanagi ducked and rolled on the pavement. A bullet whizzed through the spot where her head had just been.

The man had fired his automatic at her while running in the other direction, from a distance of approximately 80 meters.

He was sharp.

He had good aim firing backward, and he'd also done an impressive job of anticipating the movements of his target. Both abilities were those of an experienced combatant.

Still rolling, Kusanagi pulled her Sebro M5.

The man in the cap turned the corner.

Not bad!

With the Sebro in one hand, Kusanagi sprang to her feet.

The ultimate cyberbody operator.

That was how Kusanagi was known. Superficially, her body resembled a standard off-the-shelf model, but her internal parts were custom-built specialty items that gave her body more power than was visible. When it came to the sophisticated cyberbrain she used to control her high-output cyberbody, Kusanagi was peerless.

Kusanagi focused those abilities on pursuing the man.

Efficiently, she turned the corner where the man had disappeared. Without slowing, she ran up the wall as she changed direction and plowed straight toward the man from behind.

That was when the man finally noticed her. Quickly, he tried to point the barrel of his automatic in her direction.

But Kusanagi was faster.

Her right leg met the man's arm.

The kick delivered the full momentum of her speeding body, ripping the man's arm from its socket. The impact sent him tumbling on the pavement.

But even as he rolled, the man regrouped and readied his counterattack. Something glinted in his left hand.

Reflexively, Kusanagi brought her Sebro up in front of her face. Its frame deflected the shining object.

A metallic clatter resounded against the asphalt as a sheath knife with a twelve centimeter blade fell to the ground.

During the brief moment that Kusanagi was looking at the knife, the man seized the offensive. He held his severed right arm in his mouth and jammed a cable connected to his cyberbrain into its base, reconnecting it.

In his mouth, the man's right arm moved, aiming the barrel of the automatic it still held at Kusanagi.

Kusanagi's Sebro M5 spat bullets.

Before the automatic could fire, the Sebro's high-speed armor-piercing shells shattered the wrist of the man's right arm.

The man swiftly retrieved the gun with his left hand, aimed at Kusanagi, and began to shoot.

But Kusanagi was no longer there.

The blow came at him from below. Kusanagi's foot kicked up at the man's chin from underneath as her body described a graceful arc.

The man twisted, dodging the attack. He opened his mouth wide and sprang toward Kusanagi's neck, baring a pair of pointy canines.

Kusanagi jerked backward onto the ground.

The man leapt on top of her. She could hear the gnashing of his fangs. So this was his final tactic!

"Why, you little . . ."

Kusanagi summoned all of her might and threw the man off of her. Overriding her cyberbody's limiter, she sent the man flying into the air.

Without losing a split second, she kicked up at the man's chin. The bone-crunching impact registered through the sole of her

foot. The man's body was thrust upward again, sending him crashing down to the asphalt on his back.

"Ugh!"

The man tried to get back up, but Kusanagi thrust the barrel of her Sebro M5 into his smashed mouth. Her right index finger was still on the trigger. All she had to do was move it a few millimeters to splatter the man's brains across the pavement.

"It's over," she told him.

Chapter 5



The man's eyes brimmed with hatred. But on the receiving end, Kusanagi's eyes were cold and unflinching.

Carefully, Kusanagi inserted a cyberbrain lock into the plug at the base of his neck.

The man's body went limp, flopping down against the road.

After making sure that the man's brain was no longer transmitting signals to his cyberbody, Kusanagi pulled her Sebro M5 out of his mouth and returned it to her holster.

The crime lab at Section 9 was comprised of engineers referred to as Red Suits because of the crimson uniforms they wore.

They were a fairly unsavory-looking bunch. But despite their sinister appearance, they were all endowed with extraordinary talents, befitting employees of Public Safety Section 9. They were skilled technicians, capable of wide-ranging operations, from cyberbody maintenance and Tachikoma tune-ups to cyberbrain analysis.

In the midst of the arcane machines that cluttered the crime lab, the man Kusanagi had captured was laid out on a large cyberbody maintenance table in the center of the room. He was strapped down to the table, unable to move. Of course, he was already immobilized by the cyberbrain lock that restricted his cyberbody functions.

The man's brain had been removed from his body and placed atop a box next to the platform. It was a cyberbrain examination-type memory box, designed to send pseudo-signals to the brain similar to the ones it would receive when connected to a body.

People went insane if their cyberbrain was disconnected from their cyberbody for too long. In order to maintain a state of normalcy in a disconnected cyberbrain, it was necessary to send pseudo-signals to the brain, imitating the presence of the organs, limbs, and internal workings. But since pseudo-signals alone left the subject in a state paramount to being physically tied up, the cyberbrain was still highly susceptible to stress.

The Red Suit kept an eye on the monitor that displayed data from the memory box as he reported his findings to Kusanagi.

"As you can see, it's an illegal high-output cyberbody and its function limit system has been disabled. We still need to track down the original maker, but we know it's a model that was distributed in the Kantō Refugee Residential Zone."

"The Kantō Refugee Residential Zone?"

The Kantō Refugee Residential Zone was one of the districts that the government used to house refugees invited into the country as a source of labor after the war. Now that the nation's major cities had been rebuilt, most of the refugees had outlived their

usefulness, existing only as a burden on Japanese taxpayers.

While the government had pared down the refugee invitation program, the number of refugees continued to grow steadily. There was no comprehensive oversight system for the Refugee Zones, and security was in a continual state of decline. The Zones had become a haven for wanted criminals and terrorist organizations, and were widely regarded as hotbeds of crime.

Apparently, this man had connections there.

"The serial number has been scratched out, but the composition of the parts is unmistakable," the Red Suit explained.

"Kantō, hmm? From what I saw at the anti-China faction's base, this man had some sort of relationship with that group—and I don't think he was a mere intermediary."

Kusanagi got the sense that the man had been operating under someone else's direction. Perhaps someone was manipulating the anti-China militants from behind the scenes.

"Have a look at this."

The Red Suit peeled back the man's lips to expose an enormous pair of fangs.

"Pretty impressive, eh?" he commented.

"For injecting micromachines?" Kusanagi asked.

"Precisely. They're hollow on the inside, designed to inject a viral micromachine solution into whomever he bites."

"So he implanted micromachines in the assailants that caused them to attack their husbands and lovers?"

"Apparently so. In any case, we now have a sample of the sought-after micromachines. We're in the process of analyzing them. One more thing . . ."

The Red Suit took out a medical chart and read from it.

"We found evidence that his cyberbrain memory had been overwritten."

"Overwritten?"

"The data accumulated in his cyberbody memory doesn't match his cyberbrain log. His cyberbrain's programmed to assign priority to carrying out commands, and the more detailed areas are simply designated 'memory errors.' If he'd gone on like that, pretty soon his brain would have caught on to the processing inconsistencies and fallen into a state of confusion."

"So someone ordered him to kill Kashimura and Itakura," Kusanagi concluded.

"That's how it looks," the Red Suit agreed.

"Did you find any memories relating to his involvement with the anti-China faction?" she asked.

"To an extent. He had memories of the names and faces of the militants he shot to death at their headquarters. That was all we found, so he doesn't seem to have been very heavily involved."

"I see. Does it look like you'll be able to uncover his true identity?" Kusanagi asked.

The Red Suit shook his head. "His memory wasn't just overwritten once or twice. It looks like he did this sort of thing professionally."

"I see. I'd like a log of the Nets he was accessing."

"Fine. I'll send it to you. Are you going to dive it?" the Red Suit asked.

"Yes."

"I recommend that you go through a barrier device, just in case."

The Red Suit placed a terminal roughly the size of his palm on the tray next to the table.

Kusanagi picked it up. "Is this the new barrier you just finished developing the other day?"

"That's the one. You set it up with an existing dive barrier, but it uses the patterns from all the viruses that have been detected up until now to anticipate every possible type of virus and self-synthesize new barriers in real time."

"To pack that many features in, you must have improved the hardware's capacity as well," Kusanagi remarked.

"Naturally. We brought it up one order of magnitude."

"Then I'll just use the hardware," Kusanagi said. "Not that I don't trust you, but I hate wasting time on analysis to customize someone else's codes."

"Fine with me. In exchange, we'll pick up your source code, Major."

"Aren't you crafty," Kusanagi said as she picked up the barrier terminal and exited the lab.

A small room contained Section 9's dive devices, mechanisms for conducting searches in the vast Net.

The device was connected to the plug in the back of a user's neck to provide auxiliary processing power, reducing the burden on the user's cyberbrain. At the same time, it protected the user by purging relay points of viruses on the Net and attack barriers set along in the route of entry.

The Dive Room where these mechanisms were housed was already occupied. More than a dozen empty coffee cans and nutrient bar packages were lined up on one of the dive device terminals.

"That's a lovely collection," Kusanagi commented.

"Thanks," the bearded man using one of the dive devices replied.

It was Ishikawa.

A veteran member of Section 9, he normally took charge of Net searches and intelligence.

Ishikawa stretched and scratched his head. "I've been diving for twenty four hours, identifying the anti-China faction's Nets. You too, Major?"

"I've been investigating Kashimura and the vampires."

Kusanagi pulled down the dive device terminal next to Ishikawa and plugged the terminal the Red Suit had given her into an extension port.

"What's that?" Ishikawa asked.

"The latest from the Red Suits. New barrier hardware."

"Is it any good?"

"Who knows? I'm about to give it a try."

"Gathering data on the front lines, eh? Sounds like their style."

"I'm remaking the barrier program. Ishikawa, do you still have the dive device maze barrier I used the other day?"

"The one that sends people into an eternal loop? It's here, but it's developed some quirks."

"I don't mind," Kusanagi said. "I'll give it a little makeover."

Ishikawa sent the data to her via the Section 9 Net. Kusanagi opened the source code and reconstructed it to fit the new hardware, debugging it several times.

At the same time, she referenced the access log from the cyberbrain of the man she'd arrested, narrowing in on information related to the case.

Most of the hits were of map data.

Kusanagi inferred that it had probably been the man's first time in Niihama. She found a record of a map to Club Nosferatu, the same one Kusanagi had used to retrace Mikisaka's footsteps.

Then there was news site data.

It was common for suspects to frequent such sites in order to stay abreast of current events. Sometimes even a small news item could serve as a clue.

Such information sites dominated the access log in the man's cyberbrain.

At first glance, the information seemed completely random.

Time to try a new approach.

Kusanagi went through and selected the types of information that occurred the most frequently.

It was no surprise that there were large quantities of information pertaining to Kashimura and Itakura.

The second largest category was information about incidents perpetrated by the anti-China faction. These ranged from political demonstrations to acts of violence.

Among them, there was one incident about which the man had gathered extremely detailed information from every possible angle.

“The *SS Hope* Incident?”

Kusanagi muttered the nickname aloud.

The *SS Hope* Incident.

It had taken place three years ago.

A Chinese passenger ship called the *SS Hope* had been traveling through the East China Sea towards Fukuoka, when it had been attacked by an armed group of self-proclaimed anti-China activists.

The group had pulled up along side the *SS Hope* in a small speedboat, boarded her afterdeck, and commandeered the ship.

The Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs was on board the *SS Hope*, and was taken hostage. The kidnappers demanded that Chinese government officials be permanently banned from entering Japan, declaring that they had boarded the ship to prevent the Chinese Vice Minister from disembarking on Japanese soil.

The official in question had petitioned to be allowed to visit the Kagoshima War Memorial—not on behalf of the Chinese government, but for personal reasons.

Two politicians who had supported the Vice Minister’s visit to Japan were also aboard the *SS Hope* with their families. Representative Kashimura and Representative Itakura.

Both were Japanese officials with close ties to China, and they, too, were targeted by the anti-China group. The militants found their names on the ship’s roster and held them at gunpoint on deck with the Vice Minister.

With loud cries, the militants raised a banner emblazoned with the message "Remember Okinawa!" for the news helicopters overhead to see, and those words soon rippled through the media.

This act was probably the hijackers' true objective.

Eight hours later, the Maritime Safety Agency's counterterrorism squad surrounded the ship and the hijackers surrendered their weapons. They were all arrested and were currently still serving out their jail terms.

Kashimura and Itakura and the other Japanese passengers were brought back to Japan by a Maritime Safety Agency patrol vessel. The Chinese Vice Minister abandoned his visit to Japan, returning to China aboard the *SS Hope*.

It was another three years before the Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs was finally able to achieve his long-awaited pilgrimage. When he did, another attempt was made on his life—but that was another story.

After the incident, Kashimura and Itakura became even more dedicated to improving relations with China, launching a movement to create a security pact based in Asia.

Such a pact was still yet to be realized, but within Japan, people had begun to question whether their nation should align itself with the American Empire or with China.

Kusanagi hadn't known that Itakura had been on board the *SS Hope*. She'd been overseas when the incident had taken place, and this was the first time she had learned the details of the case.

What were the hidden forces at work?

If the man in the baseball cap had used Akiko to kill Kashimura, he shared a common goal with the anti-China militants.

But he had ravaged their headquarters.

Kusanagi opened the footage that the Tachikoma had recorded before and after the incident.

Two men sat on a sofa inside the apartment.

One was reading a newspaper. The other was drinking a beer and appeared to be talking to the man with the paper. An automatic gun lay exposed on the table in front of them.

Suddenly, both men looked toward the door and reached reflexively toward the gun—they were no strangers to rough play. But then they sat back and relaxed again.

Two new men had entered the footage. One had a shaved head and the other wore a baseball cap pulled down low over his eyes.

In a deliberate motion, the man in the baseball cap picked up the automatic and shot the man with the newspaper in the face. Without pausing, he shot the other man through the head as well.

The bald man made a break for the door.

Calmly, the man in the baseball cap left the room and went after him.

After that came the part Kusanagi and Togusa had witnessed—the man in the baseball cap shot the bald man down in the hallway

and tried to make his escape.

From the footage, it was apparent that the anti-China faction had trusted the man Kusanagi had arrested. There had definitely been a relationship between the two parties.

But for some reason, the man in the baseball cap had shot and killed the members of the group.

In the subject's memory, the only trace of his relationship to these men had been a record of their names and faces. Beyond that, he had no recollections of them.

Kusanagi couldn't extract the memories of the men who had been killed because they'd all been shot through the face, destroying their brains.

Something was being covered up.

For now, the *SS Hope* Incident seemed like it might be the key to unraveling this case.

"Ishikawa," Kusanagi called without removing the dive device. "Can you get me the ship's roster from the *SS Hope* Incident?"

"Now that's a case I haven't heard about in a while. It was a Chinese ship, right? I doubt the Chinese government has made that information public, but I'll see what I can do."

"Please do."

Kusanagi dived back into the Net. A call sign had just come up, indicating that the debugging process was finished.

She began to navigate the Net based on the man's access log.

Information on the Net came and went like stars in the sky.

Wandering through its vast expanses in search of a single clue was like trying to find a particular speck of dust in outer space.

With just one clue, the scope of her search would narrow dramatically. But right now, everything was still too vague.

"The possibilities are endless," she muttered.

Just then, a cybercomm from Ishikawa flashed in.

<Major. I found the SS Hope's roster.>

"Thank you."

<I'm afraid I wasn't able to penetrate the Chinese government's Nets. The Maritime Safety Agency took the Japanese passengers aboard one of their patrol vessels, right? There's a record of the names of the Japanese passengers, but I couldn't get any information on the Chinese people on board.>

"I think this should do it."

Kusanagi opened the information from Ishikawa.

The list included Kashimura and Itakura, who had been taken hostage.

Then she found Akiko Kashimura's name.

Next, Sachiko Itakura.

Itakura's daughter.

The record indicated that she was a student at Kōhaku Junior High School. A Net search indicated that currently Sachiko Itakura was enrolled at Niihama Central High School.

When Kusanagi opened the photograph of Itakura's daughter in the *SS Hope's* records, she experienced a mild shock.

Minori Mikisaka.

But why?

Kusanagi retrieved Minori Mikisaka's record from the Niihama family registry.

MINORI MIKISAKA— THIRD YEAR STUDENT, KŌHAKU JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL.

She'd discovered the link between Mikisaka and Itakura.

Itakura's daughter and Mikisaka had been enrolled in the same junior high school.

But this raised a new question. Why had Mikisaka been aboard the *SS Hope* under Itakura's daughter's name?

For now, the circumstances were unclear.

As Kusanagi continued to peruse the passenger roster, she came across another surprise.

The roster included the names of all of each of the Vampire murder victims.

<Major, the analysis of the subject's cyberbrain is nearly complete.>

The cybercomm was from one of the Red Suits.

"Roger. Is he conscious?"

<Mostly. The drugs haven't worn off completely.>

"Bring him to the interrogation room. I'll be right over."

Kusanagi removed the dive device and headed for the door.

The man in the baseball cap sat in a chair in a small room behind multiple layers of bulletproof glass.

His only restraint was the cyberbrain lock.

The cable extending out of it was connected to a wall-mounted terminal.

The man eyed Kusanagi and the Red Suit. Kusanagi addressed him coolly.

"Can you hear me? I've had just your cybercomm function released, but your other functions will remain immobilized."

< . . . I won't tell you anything! >

"Fine with me. I've already had most of your memory salvaged. This is really just a formality to confirm that the content of your memory is accurate. Whether or not you choose to cooperate, we can trace whether a statement is true or false based on your brain signals. In other words, there's no 'right to remain silent' in this interrogation."

The man's brain waveforms increased in amplitude, oscillating wildly.

The Red Suit at Kusanagi's side analyzed them calmly. "He's furious."

"I'm glad he's easy to read," Kusanagi commented.

She observed the man.

"First, confirm how you attacked Akiko Kashimura."

There was no reaction from the man in the chair, since all of the muscles in his body were paralyzed, but his brain waves exhibited angry waveforms.

Kusanagi continued. "This is what we've reconstructed from your memory: You came to Kashimura's home disguised as a delivery person and attacked his foster daughter when she answered the door. You bit her neck, injecting micromachines into her bloodstream. We've retrieved the device you used from your mouth."

The man's brainwaves displayed an affirmative pattern. They were stable.

"You used Akiko Kashimura to kill Representative Kashimura, correct?"

The man didn't answer, but his brainwaves fluctuated.

The Red Suit looked at Kusanagi. "Looks like the answer's 'no.'"

"You didn't intend to kill Kashimura?"

The man's brainwaves stabilized.

"So he didn't want Kashimura dead?" she said.

"Maybe not. Even though he had information about Kashimura, that doesn't mean he wanted to murder him. Perhaps he didn't intend to kill Itakura either?"

"It's possible." Kusanagi changed tack. "Well then, your next target was Minori Mikisaka, correct?"

The brainwaves oscillated.

"Was it Sachiko Itakura, then?"

The brainwaves stabilized.

"Where did you acquire her information?"

The man was silent. Kusanagi continued her interrogation.

"From the *SS Hope* Incident records?"

The brainwaves remained steady.

"Who gave you the information about the *SS Hope* Incident?"

No answer.

"It was the anti-China faction, wasn't it?"

The brainwaves didn't oscillate.

Sure enough, the man's information had come from the anti-China faction.

That data included the *SS Hope's* ship records, information that

the anti-China militants would have acquired through their own involvement.

That explained why the man had mistaken Mikisaka for Itakura's daughter—he had sought out her face and hunted her down, making his attack after discovering that she frequented Club Nosferatu.

But he hadn't intended to murder Kashimura and Itakura.

Who was the real mastermind behind the killings? This man had simply wound up here because someone had overwritten his memory to create vampires that would kill Kashimura and Itakura.

That was all Kusanagi could learn from his memory. Beyond that, she would have to go to the victims to find further clues.

She would have to try Itakura.

Even now, his life was probably still in danger.

Kusanagi connected to Aramaki by cybercomm.

"Chief. I'd like to meet with Itakura."

<Itakura?>

"He's still being targeted. Not by anti-China militants. By vampires."

<And you want to go see him to tell him that?>

"Yes, that's exactly what I want to do."

<All right. I'll arrange it.>

Aramaki closed the cybercomm conversation.

Kusanagi regarded the man sitting in front of her.

He, too, was no more than the tool of someone who wanted to kill.

A murderer with an MO of using his prey's loved ones as murder weapons.

It was a tactic that spoke volumes of the perpetrator's malice for his victims.

"There are wheels within wheels," Kusanagi murmured as she exited the interrogation room.

Chapter 6



Itakura's home was located approximately one hour from Niihama's city center by car, in a rural area with a somehow nostalgic atmosphere. The house, with its ceramic tile roof, was preserved in the style of the past century.

Kusanagi and Aramaki were seated in Itakura's living room. They were served tea in traditional ceramic bowls on the low table in front of them.

"Enjoy."

The refreshments were presented by a young girl: Sachiko Itakura. She had lily-white skin and a face like a Japanese doll—completely unlike Mikisaka.

Hyōei Itakura sat across from his two visitors.

"So you're the famous Aramaki. I've heard many stories about you," he opened.

"You flatter me. And I hear that although you've retired from politics, many people still couldn't get by without you, Mr.

Itakura," Aramaki said graciously. "Now, I don't mean to be abrupt—but I'm afraid that you and your family are in danger."

The benevolent expression disappeared from Itakura's face and was replaced by a fierce scowl.

Perhaps these were his true colors.

Itakura cast a fleeting glance at Kusanagi. Aramaki introduced her.

"This is Kusanagi, a member of my team. She's handling the Kashimura case."

Kusanagi bowed.

"I see." Itakura let out a deep exhalation and looked at Aramaki. "I understand Kashimura has been murdered."

"Yes."

"According to the media, he was killed by a burglar." Itakura sipped his tea. "That's not the real story, is it?"

Aramaki shook his head.

"Kusanagi can fill you in," he said.

"The official version is that Representative Kashimura was attacked and murdered by a burglar who infiltrated his home," Kusanagi explained. "But I'm afraid that's not what really happened."

"I see."

"Mr. Itakura, have you heard about the Vampire Incidents?"

"... I've heard rumors."

"Representative Kashimura's murder was perpetrated by one such vampire."

Itakura listened silently. Kusanagi continued.

"Representative Kashimura's murder was carried out by his adopted daughter, Akiko Kashimura, and he died of cyberbrain death. We know that the micromachines Akiko delivered to Representative Kashimura's brain through his carotid artery contained a cyberbrain-death-triggering virus."

Itakura's eyes narrowed.

"And you're saying that I'm next? That someone will try to attack my daughter Sachiko and I?"

"They already have."

"They have?"

"A young girl was programmed to attack you—to be precise, she was turned into a vampire in order to serve as your assassin."

Kusanagi took out a photograph and placed it on the table. It was the picture of Minori Mikisaka's face, retrieved from the *SS Hope's* roster.

"Minori Mikisaka. A student at the Niihama Vocational Training School. She went out to a club called Nosferatu. Later, a man injected her with a virus that would turn her into a vampire."

In the next room, they heard the sound of something drop to the *tatami* floor.

Kusanagi ignored it and continued speaking.

"Perhaps by mere coincidence, she wound up attacking me in the road."

"She attacked you?"

"Yes. When I investigated her cyberbrain, I encountered deep loathing and a single intense urge: to bite you to death."

Unconsciously, Itakura pressed a hand to his neck.

"... I see. This girl was attacked."

"Mr. Itakura, did you know this girl?" Aramaki inquired.

Itakura didn't answer. Kusanagi went on.

"Were you aware that this girl was aboard the *SS Hope*, registered as Sachiko Itakura?"

Itakura remained silent.

"If we look at all of the Vampire Incidents so far, without exception, the assailants were people well known to their victims. They were the victim's loved ones, one might say. Why do you suppose this young girl, Mikisaka, was turned into a vampire?"

Itakura closed his eyes tightly as he listened to Kusanagi.

Kusanagi and Aramaki waited for his response.

But the answer came not from Itakura, but from his daughter, Sachiko, who had been listening from the next room.

"Mikisaka was attacked because she was my stand-in."

"Sachiko!" Itakura rebuked her.

"Your stand-in?" Kusanagi said, looking at Sachiko.

"Yes. My replacement. She went on the *SS Hope* cruise in my place, under my name."

Sachiko entered the room and knelt formally on the floor next to her father.

Itakura wore a stern expression, but he made no further efforts to silence his daughter.

"I've always been sickly, and I was too weak to ever receive cyberbrain implants or a prosthetic body. Sometimes I have seizures that cause me to collapse. On the day of the cruise, I had one of my seizures and was unable to participate."

"And Mikisaka went on your behalf?"

"Yes. She and I were classmates. I asked her to go on the *SS Hope* cruise with my father and to pretend to be me."

"Sachiko, I'll tell them the rest."

"Yes, Father."

"A parent and child event was planned for the cruise. It would have been awkward if I didn't have my daughter at my side. It was just for one, unofficial event—we asked her to serve as a last-minute stand-in."

"We offered to pay her and she was kind enough to help. But I never thought something like this . . ." Sachiko balled up her fists on her knees. Her shoulders trembled.

Minori Mikisaka had drawn the short straw, and fate had dealt her a nasty blow.

Moreover, Sachiko Itakura had been targeted merely because she was Hyōei Itakura's daughter. That explained why the man had attacked Mikisaka rather than Itakura's daughter—it was because of the passenger roster from the *SS Hope* cruise.

Now all they had to do was find out who had taken that information and sent the man in the baseball cap to Niihama as an assassin.

"Aramaki . . ." Itakura began.

"Yes?"

"I want to protect Sachiko. I want to protect my family."

"Mr. Itakura," Kusanagi said.

Itakura raised his head. In the space of a few minutes, he seemed to have aged dramatically.

"If you have any inkling as to why someone would come after

you and Mr. Kashimura, please share it with us. It's the best way to protect your daughter and yourself," she told him.

Itakura turned and looked at Sachiko.

"Sachiko. Would you please leave the room?"

Sachiko seemed to detect the conversation's sudden shift in tone. Wordlessly, she exited the room.

Itakura watched her leave. Then he rose quietly to his feet.

Beyond the open glass door, a Japanese garden was visible. When Itakura stepped down into it, he simply looked like a gentle old man with a fondness for gardening.

He spoke without turning to face them.

"Aramaki . . ."

"Yes?"

"Have you heard of a man called Roy Tairagi?"

"Roy Tairagi . . . If I'm not mistaken, he was suspected of working as a double agent during the war and has been missing ever since," Aramaki recalled.

"If someone is plotting to kill me using these methods that were used on the other victims, it can only be Roy Tairagi," Itakura said.

"Tairagi?"

"Aramaki, have you heard of the Land SDF Cyberbrain Warfare Research Lab?"

" . . . I've heard rumors. However, I recall hearing that it never actually existed."

"There are things that even the intelligence office doesn't know."

"Then it did exist?"

Itakura nodded wordlessly.

Then, gazing off into the distance, he continued. "Kashimura and I—and the other four who were killed—all worked there together. Of course, it isn't something we write on our resumé. All of the records have been destroyed."

"I had no idea."

"When the *SS Hope* Incident took place, we were aboard the cruise as a sort of reunion. It was Kashimura's idea. Everyone was talking about the fact that one of us was missing. Roy Tairagi—a man that both Kashimura and I preferred to forget."

"That's a harsh statement."

"A virus that turns people into vampires and programs them to kill . . . it has to be based on a technology developed by Roy Tairagi."

"He was the inventor?"

"Yes. It was quite a long time ago. Right at the dawn of the cyberbrain era, when scientists were just beginning to understand how memory worked. Tairagi invented micromachines that could control people's emotions, based on the idea that our emotions are triggered by our memories."

"Controlling people's emotions . . . ?"

"Yes—more precisely, it was a micromachine-borne virus that acted on people's emotions. If we could understand how feelings like love and hatred originate, we could manipulate those feelings. We could even change love into hatred, its polar opposite. We weren't able to exercise precision control over people's feel-

ings, but it wasn't difficult to overwrite powerfully directional emotions with their polar opposites. Tairagi was a genius. He used micromachines to invent what he called the Love Drug, a technology that transformed hatred into love."

"Hatred . . . into love?"

"That's correct. He said it could be used to make all of the people in the world who hate each other renounce war and embrace peace."

"Never heard of it," Aramaki said coolly.

Itakura looked at him and smiled weakly.

"That's because it was developed by us and the four men who've been murdered. To Kashimura and I, conducting research and development for the government in the middle of a war, our top priority was to develop micromachines to sabotage the enemy. We didn't see the value in developing micromachines that would end conflict."

"So you used those micromachines for the opposite purpose?"

"Yes. To turn love into hatred . . . we developed a poison that would wreak havoc on an enemy nation. The prototype we developed in the lab was a technology activated when the subject received affection from another party. The subject's own affection for that party was transformed into hatred, prompting them to inject the love object with deadly micromachines."

"Just like in the Vampire Incidents," Kusanagi remarked, recalling the gruesome crime scene.

"Exactly. At the lab, we nicknamed these micromachines

"Vampires." The most effective way to deliver micromachines into a subject's brain is through their jugular, so the assailant had to bite their victim's neck. One of the technicians came up with the nickname because of that quality and the fact that the violence was perpetrated against an object of affection."

"That's in awfully poor taste," Kusanagi remarked caustically. Itakura shook his head as if to dispel his haunting past.

"... Except for Tairagi, we were all excited about the project. We could unleash this technology on an enemy state and destroy them from within. But before we applied it in actual warfare, we decided to conduct a clinical test."

"The incident in which the recon brigade of the 16th Land Unit dispatched to the continent was completely annihilated in a single night, when its soldiers mysteriously attacked each another," Aramaki said.

Itakura turned to Aramaki, his expression stern. "How did you know that?"

"My unit was the one that retrieved the corpses of the 16th Land Unit Recon Brigade. We contacted the SDF's top brass, but somewhere in the command chain the entire story got hushed up."

"That was probably Kashimura's handiwork."

"Jūzō Kashimura?"

"Right. The 16th Land Unit Recon Brigade experiment proved that the micromachines could work with brotherly love or camaraderie—any type of group solidarity. You saw it yourself. The experiment was a success. We got exactly the results we had hoped for."

For a moment, Itakura's eyes seemed flicker with the passionate excitement of years past.

"It was successful, all right," Aramaki said. "All six members of the recon brigade bit each other's throats to death. We even found the corpses of several civilian women who had been working at the garrison. Why didn't you publish the results of your experiment?"

"The government put the brakes on the project. They were afraid of the trouble that might ensue if such a weapon was used in actual warfare, and of the threat of an epidemic since it was based on a virus. That never could have happened; the virus had to be contained in the subject's brain after injecting micromachines programmed with an action command into the bloodstream. The virus was secure—it wouldn't have spread over the Net. But the government was overly concerned about how the international community would react, and they ordered the military to abandon the program."

"Judging by the current situation, whatever their reasons, perhaps the government did the right thing," Kusanagi said. "But there is one question that still nags me."

"What's that?" Itakura looked at her.

Kusanagi recalled the look in Mikisaka's eyes.

It was true that her eyes had held complex emotions, like love and hatred mixed together.

"Why did Minori Mikisaka attack me?"

"Was she on drugs?" Itakura asked.

"Yes. There was evidence of cyberbrain drug use."

"Most likely, the drug's effects interfered with the virus. Since she didn't find the person she was ordered to kill, she simply focused her hatred on the person who showed her the most kindness. That was a flaw of the technology."

"Now we know that a large number of assassins can be created even without spreading the virus over the Net," Kusanagi said. "Is the formula for those micromachines still out there somewhere?"

"Only Tairagi really knew how to make them. The rest of us were only involved in testing and application."

"But now they've resurfaced."

"It's Tairagi. He's recreated them. Probably to wreak his revenge on us . . ."

"Revenge?"

"After the government suspended the project, we continued our research at the military research facility in Tōhoku. Only Tairagi refused—he said he was going back to Tokyo. He was planning to desert. But we held his son hostage to prevent him from leaving. We needed him to continue our work."

"But he got away?"

"Yes. He and his son defected to China. Unfortunately for him, Tokyo was annihilated before he could ever return."

"So that was how he got pegged as a double agent," Kusanagi concluded.

"Precisely. When the war ended and we had families of our own, we finally began to regret what we'd done. I've been trying to make up for it ever since."

"If you really feel that way, don't you think you should go public with the truth?" Kusanagi asked.

"I have to protect my family now. Please, Aramaki. Keep me—keep Sachiko—safe from Tairagi."

"We'll do our utmost to protect you," Aramaki promised.

"Thank you . . ."

"But Mr. Itakura—don't misunderstand. We're doing this because you possess critical state secrets. The day this case is solved, you will receive the punishment you deserve from the proper authorities."

" . . . I understand. As long as my daughter's future is protected, I don't care what happens to me." Itakura hung his head.

With that, Kusanagi and Aramaki left the Itakura residence.

Chapter 7



<Hey, Major?>

"Yes?"

<The virus won't affect us, will it? If it does, it'll erase our memories, right?>

Kusanagi raised her head and looked at the Tachikoma.

After visiting the Itakura residence, she had returned to the warehouse at Section 9, where she'd washed the virus they'd extracted from the micromachine sample into a Tachikoma in order to observe the infection process.

Kusanagi reasoned that by analyzing the micromachines Tairagi had developed, she would gain an understanding of Tairagi himself.

"Even if it does erase your memory, you can recover a backup by synchronizing, right? And I have you restrained just in case you start to go berserk."

The Tachikoma conversing with Kusanagi was suspended in midair by chains.

A memory box emulator would have done the trick, too, but Kusanagi had chosen to use the Tachikoma's AI in order to examine the route of infection in a mind that contained a degree of uncertainty, like that of a human being.

If the virus worked, the subject might go on a homicidal rampage.

By preparing a sample vaccine before that happened, they could minimize the potential damage.

The other Tachikomas began to gather around the one dangling from the ceiling.

<Check it out! Witness our comrade's pitiful state!>

<So this is what it means to be deprived of freedom!>

<Cut it out! Don't look at me!>

<What a waste! If you come down with the virus the Major's testing, your memory of it will be erased!>

<Well, duh! It's extremely dangerous! We could end up killing each other, you know!>

<But just look at you—you can't do anything!> One of the Tachikomas snorted disdainfully at the Tachikoma hanging in the air.

<Ngngn . . . > the chained Tachikoma groaned in frustration.

<But we would certainly love to hear your feedback regarding this valuable experience!>

<Now that you mention it, I hear there's a practice among human beings in which they deliberately tie themselves up to achieve a state of heightened excitement!>

<Yes, I understand it's connected with sadomasochistic relationships!>

<To further extrapolate, couldn't that model be applied to the Major's

relationship with Batou?>

<You may be right. It seems clear that Batou derives pleasure from being treated coldly by the Major!>

<Yeah, Major, why is that?>

"All right, everybody, show's over. Now, I've got something special for you," Kusanagi said to the chained Tachikoma.

<Hey, that's . . . NATURAL OIL!!>

Kusanagi was holding a can of the natural oil that Batou used. She poured it into the oil tank of the Tachikoma dangling from the ceiling.

<Luck-out!> the other Tachikomas began to clamor. *<Why does he get all the breaks?>*

<I . . . I think I love you, Major!> The Tachikoma hanging from the ceiling said to Kusanagi.

"Well, thank you!" Kusanagi observed the experiment's subject calmly, ignoring the peanut gallery.

Then it happened.

<Major . . . ?> the suspended Tachikoma called out to Kusanagi.

"What is it?"

<My thoughts are kind of . . . unstable . . . >

"Looks like the virus is taking effect." Kusanagi linked to the infected Tachikoma via the Net.

"The rest of you, go into autistic mode! I don't want you getting infected!"

<Y-yikes!> the other Tachikomas hurried to obey.

The Tachikoma hanging from the ceiling was connected to a

Local Net that was confined to the room, so that the other terminals at Section 9 wouldn't be affected.

Kusanagi dived into the Tachikoma's cyberbrain.

Its thoughts were unstable.

The memories had begun to eat each other; yes, that was the best way to describe it. That was exactly the situation playing out in the Tachikoma's cyberbrain.

The memory units were like points of light, fusing with one another and melting together into a single memory, with each process triggering further reactions. At first there were as many memory units as there were stars in the sky, but they were diminishing at an astounding rate.

The Tachikoma's memory was backed up, so it would be easy to recover. That setup was built into the Tachikoma, but if a human being were to attempt the same thing, it would impose an incredible strain on his or her cyberbrain and could lead to complications.

At best, those complications might result in a partial loss of memory. At worst, they could trigger a brain disorder similar to cyberbrain sclerosis.

"Looks like feelings of love are the catalyst, all right."

By giving the Tachikoma natural oil—a special treat—Kusanagi had provided it with a powerful feeling of joy and privilege. Those feelings had acted as a trigger, causing the virus to take effect.

This in itself was a threat. Memory-erasing viruses had first

emerged when the Net infrastructure was still new and people were just beginning to depend on the Internet. Today, aspects of those viruses still survived as new malignant strings of code surfaced in cyberspace like random thoughts. Most of them were executable programs, created simply as pranks.

The best tactic was to beware the unfamiliar. When people caught on to the practice of deleting suspicious executable commands they didn't recognize, pranksters learned to disguise these executable commands as memory—something everyone used. When an infected person engaged a specific memory pattern, the virus automatically took effect.

For example, the simple act of switching on a burner to cook dinner could trigger a memory-deleting virus.

Chain reaction-style viruses that erased a person's entire memory had sinister nicknames like "All Delete" or "Black Hole." But vaccines had become widely accessible at Net infrastructure relay points, and those viruses were well on their way to being completely eradicated. Every now and then, an outbreak was reported on a Local Net. But since the number of users was limited, it was easy to pinpoint the offender and to prevent the infection from spreading.

Cybercops kept a sharp eye out for such viruses, and oversight had come a long way since the days when the Net had been a legal no-man's land. But in the vast reaches of the Net, new viruses were always emerging. It was a game of cat and mouse between viruses and vaccines, and that race for survival was never-ending.

The virus Kusanagi was observing right now was a sophisticated conditional-selection-type memory deletion virus, capable of erasing only specific memories.

The mere fact that Roy Tairagi had been so accurate in isolating emotions like love and affection was impressive. Kusanagi had to give him credit for his technical prowess in creating this virus' foundation.

If Tairagi had commanded theoretical abilities of this caliber back in the war, when cyberbrain warfare had been common, his abilities now might even rival Kusanagi's.

Kusanagi wanted to meet him.

She was beginning to be intrigued.

Right now, he was a criminal, worthy of nothing better than her contempt. But even so, she felt a burgeoning desire to meet a man whose powers were quite possibly greater than her own.

Feelings of tenderness—for Mikisaka, it had been the act of being cradled in someone's arms. For the Tachikoma, it was being given oil. These innocent acts that touched people's hearts became triggers, activating a virus that commanded its host to attack a specified person.

The real power of this virus wasn't its capacity to create homicidal maniacs.

It was the potential that lay just beyond its current horizon.

The ability to control others.

If such a technology became available—and could be indiscriminately propagated over the Net—it could be used seize control over the minds of the populace.

During times of war, it could be used to stifle social unrest.

In politics, the ability to control public opinion could give rise to dictators. It would provide the ultimate means of exercising unrestrained power.

Right now, only Tairagi commanded this technology.

If he were alive, Kusanagi had to find him.

The Tachikoma's memory was almost completely gone. Its affection would soon turn into hatred. Kusanagi recorded the infection process and conveyed the information to Ishikawa.

"Ishikawa. I'd like you to ready a vaccine for this virus. It's a conditional-selection type; the symptoms start when the subject's memory is completely deleted. If you start with a loop-type vaccine that causes memories to continually crush each other and create a program to eliminate it, that should do the trick."

<Roger.>

Kusanagi looked at the executable command the virus had created.

Hatred. Darkness.

Those were the words she perceived at the virus' core.

They reflected the mind of the virus' author. They contained the starting point and motive of the virus' creation.

Resolutely, Kusanagi stepped forward into the darkness.

A tiny memory was hidden within it.

—What's this?

The instant she encountered it, Kusanagi's consciousness was launched into the memory.

Everything was flooded with a blinding light.

Waves of heat and dazzling brightness streamed down from the summer sun.

Where . . .

Kusanagi was standing on an unfamiliar street.

A narrow road stretched out in front of Kusanagi. It was barely wide enough for a single car. Both sides of the street were lined by rows of shops.

There was no arcade overhead, and the world flags decorating the street drooped listlessly in the summer sun.

Kusanagi's memory held no images that resembled this place. She wasn't in Niihama or Fukuoka.

There was an arched gate at the entrance, inscribed with the words "Ogikubo Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street."

Ogikubo?

Kusanagi ran a search on the unfamiliar name.

According to current map data, no such location existed.

Kusanagi continued searching, trying earlier information. Finally, she came across a hit.

Ogikubo, Suginami Ward, Tokyo.

It was a neighborhood in Tokyo, the former capital.

Nowadays, it would fall inside the Kantō Refugee Residential Zone.

Kusanagi looked around, taking in her surroundings.

Behind her, there was nothing. Nothing to either side of her, either. The shopping street alone was vividly recreated. She was only viewing a tiny sliver of memory.

The rest of the data probably existed somewhere, in another location.

The concrete blocks that paved the street wavered in the blazing sun—an optical illusion caused by the heat rising up from the road.

The street was deserted.

Kusanagi could hear a cicada singing somewhere.

Looks like I've got one option.

Kusanagi started down the shopping street.

The tinkle of a bell.

She looked up. A wind-bell hanging from a second-story window was ringing.

There was no wind.

But now wind-bells of all colors began to chime in the eaves, as if set off by a chain reaction.

Their cool, clear music drowned out the cicada.

A red sign read "Tobacco."

Bright banners peaked out from beneath the eaves.

A fluttering shop curtain that read "Shaved Ice."

The scenery undulated hazily.

Perhaps something connected to Roy Tairagi was hidden here.

But if so, what?

Kusanagi continued walking, looking for a clue.

The road seemed to go on forever.

She looked back. Even though she'd been walking for some time, she could still see the street's entrance.

Somehow, the street was twisted and sealed. It was probably an infinite loop.

Unless she found the key, she would never escape.

Talk about a simple game. It's like a trial version.

She began to walk again.

There had to be a flag somewhere.

Kusanagi walked.

And walked.

And walked.

Then she stopped. She listened hard and looked hard, trying to find the flag.

She had to spot even the tiniest change.

A cat.

It came out of nowhere.

In the middle of the road, a black cat stared at her.

Could this be the flag?

The cat began to walk.

Kusanagi followed.

It walked ahead, as if to lead her.

Then it stopped in front of one of the shops and began to scratch at the glass door with its claws.

It couldn't open the door by itself.

What was inside?

Kusanagi peered through the glass.

There was someone inside the dark room.

The place appeared to be a small coffee shop, furnished only with a counter and stools. Amber liquid streamed out of a tap.

At the center of the bar, a woman in her early thirties checked her watch anxiously.

The cat began to yowl piteously.

Oblivious, the woman continued to check her watch.

Just then . . .

<Major! Watch out!>

Kusanagi's consciousness was yanked back into the present.

The Tachikoma hanging from the ceiling was swinging its body and thrashing about wildly, trying to free itself of its chains. Batou was trying to control it.

"What the hell! It took one look at you and went nuts!" he shouted.

"Oh?" Kusanagi said.

"'Oh?' That's all you've got to say?"

Calmly, Kusanagi pressed the Tachikoma's switch.

Instantly, the Tachikoma stopped moving.

"Hey, now . . ." Batou looked at the Tachikoma with worry.

"It's all right. I just reset it." Kusanagi looked at the Tachikoma who'd been infected with the virus. "Tachikoma."

<Sound check. Command, please.>

It had been completely initialized. Normally, resetting a Tachikoma simply returned it to its status just moments earlier.

<Whoa! He's been initialized!>

A murmur ran through the other Tachikomas.

<He's just like us when we were first born!>

<Wow! I'd like to get a peek inside his AI.>

"Peek all you want, but there's a virus nested in his brain. If

you get infected, you'll wind up like him," Kusanagi warned, pointing at the suspended Tachikoma. The pitiful thing hung helplessly in the air.

<... He's like a baby or something.>

<Maybe you're right.>

<I guess that would be pretty pathetic.>

The Tachikomas looked up at their dangling comrade.

"Fine, but is this little guy going to be okay?" Batou peered at the hanging Tachikoma with concern.

"I was just experimenting," Kusanagi replied. "I'll have it back to normal in no time."

"I'd appreciate that," Batou said. "There's something I'm going to need the Tachikomas to give me a hand with."

<Oh-ho! Batou says he wants us to give him a hand!>

<Anything for you, Batou!>

All at once, the Tachikomas began detaching their arms.

"That's not what I meant!"

<Just kidding!>

"Oh, great, now they're making jokes?" Batou looked at Kusanagi in consternation.

"Apparently so."

"They're not going to do that during combat, are they?"

"I don't know about that," Kusanagi said. "They're awfully curious, so unless we come up with some rules, they may just do whatever occurs to them."

"You think they can learn a sense of time, place, and occasion?" Batou wondered.

"That probably depends on the humans they work with."

Speaking of which, you don't seem to have been a very good teacher lately."

"What are you talking about?" Batou asked.

"Never mind," Kusanagi said. "Erase the data in the suspended Tachikoma's cyberbrain and reformat it. When we reinstall the backup, it'll be as good as new. I've got something I need to do, so I'll leave the rest to you."

"So I'm on cleanup, huh?"

"Thanks," Kusanagi called as she left the warehouse.

"Great," Batou muttered.

The Tachikomas tapped him on the shoulder.

<Don't worry, Batou. We'll help.>

Batou gave the Tachikomas a long, hard look.

Their eyeballs stared back at him.

"Now the Tachikomas are comforting me. I'm really done for."

He sighed, grasped the chain, and lowered the chained Tachikoma to the ground.

After leaving the warehouse, Kusanagi headed for Aramaki's office.

She had an idea she wanted to implement.

"You want to go to Tokyo?" Aramaki repeated Kusanagi's request.

Kusanagi stood across from him, on the other side of his desk. "I found a record indicating that the vampire man I brought in came to Niihama from the Kantō Refugee Residential Zone. I want to confirm that."

"... Are you sure you aren't really going to look for Tairagi?"

"There's that, too," Kusanagi acknowledged. "He knows how to produce those micromachines. If we consider the possibility that they could be abused for other purposes, we'll need to contain Tairagi and his technology ASAP."

"For precisely that reason, we can't afford to attract the attention of any other agencies. You'd have to go undercover and alone."

"I'm prepared to do that."

"You can't carry any weapons or materials that would associate you with Section 9. And we won't be able offer you any support. Understood?"

"Understood."

When you worked for Public Safety Section 9, few operations didn't entail a similar degree of risk. Kusanagi felt a sense of duty to pursue the truth and solve this case.

But beyond that, she also wanted to meet Tairagi.

With that thought, Kusanagi's mind was already focused on Tokyo, the nation's former capital.

Part 2

The Sleeping Man's Casket



Chapter 8



At dusk, the faint blue of the winter sky was pale and somehow lonesome.

The distinctive form of the building that had once housed the Metropolitan Government protruded from the water's surface, like a white tombstone. All around it, calm ocean waters stretched out endlessly.

Everything else was underwater.

Tokyo, Japan's former capital.

This was all that remained of the city that had been annihilated at the end of the previous century.

There were countless theories as to what had caused the city's demise: a meteor shower, nuclear missiles, or the tectonic events that occurred simultaneously. The truth was, it was any of them and it was all of them.

In any case, the city was dead.

Once home to over ten million people, most of it was now an

enormous underwater crater, quietly frozen in time. The crater began inside a highway road called Loop 7, and had come to be called the Loop 7 Sea. Given the tremendous scope of the damage, the prospects for redevelopment were still uncharted.

It was an hour's walk from the Shin-Tokyo Linear Train Station.

According to the road signs overhead, Kusanagi was at the intersection between Loop 7 and Oumekai Road. A faded sign that read "Kōenji Land Bridge" marked the overpass where she was standing.

The available data indicated that from here eastward, the land sloped gradually down into the sea.

Kusanagi walked west on Oumekai Road. That was where Ogikubo had once been, according to the old map information she was using.

The asphalt was cracked and uneven, testifying to the fact that the road hadn't been maintained in decades. If this area was any indication, Ogikubo would be a complete ruin.

But there was something there.

A yellow wind swept up clouds of the dry dust that covered the wide road. Abandoned buildings survived in form, but not in function. Street lamps and telephone poles lay broken in the street. Most of the windows in the buildings were shattered, too.

Just then, Kusanagi heard the growl of engines behind her.

She turned to look. Three buses driving in convoy drove past her and continued down Oumekai Road.

The men inside gazed at Kusanagi through their windows. All

of them looked exhausted. They were probably refugee laborers being transported back from an underwater dismantling site.

Their eyes registered curiosity when they saw Kusanagi walking in the street. She was wearing the type of worksite camo the refugees used, blending in to her surroundings. But a discerning observer would know better; Kusanagi's manner and bearing were not that of a refugee.

When the buses disappeared into the distance, the road was quiet again. There were no other vehicles. Gradually, the sun began to sink, and the sky ahead of Kusanagi was stained with orange. Behind her, it was already the ultramarine of night.

The darkness of the city continued to deepen.

In the dusky light, inquisitive refugee children observed Kusanagi as she walked past. As she advanced, she began to sense countless stares watching her from inside the buildings. Without slackening her pace, she focused her attention vigilantly on their source. She noticed that large numbers of people secretly made their homes in these crumbling structures.

She had already entered the Refugee Residential Zone.

The land west of Loop 7 was designated as a special zone to host the nation's refugee population.

Naturally, there were no tourists here.

Usually, the only people who came to Tokyo were redevelopment personnel, waste disposal workers, and criminals. Aside from them, the only types that ventured into these parts were the occasional thrill-seekers or journalists.

During the day, security patrols maintained a certain degree of order. But after dark, lawlessness reigned.

If you wanted to stay alive, you didn't go out at night.

It was beginning to get dark.

As night fell, a bloodthirsty viciousness began to intermingle with the curious gazes focused on Kusanagi. It made her skin tingle.

Two, three . . . more than five pairs of eyes?

A cold wind whipped down the road.

Danger was drawing closer . . . Kusanagi's instincts told her that much. She had learned to sense such things from the many brushes she'd had with death and destruction.

She reached casually behind her hip—but her Sebro M5 wasn't there. In order to maintain her cover, she hadn't been able to bring any equipment that would provide clues as to who she worked for.

The only potential identifier was her cyberbody itself.

Of course, she had enough explosives packed inside of her body to self-destruct if she were ever captured. She would blow her body up before allowing it to be used by an enemy.

That was her only recourse.

But Kusanagi had no intention of being taken prisoner without a fight.

The only weapons she carried were a knife and a single Glock 17 for self-defense.

When she'd gotten off the train in Tokyo, she'd obtained them from a weapons dealer, a smuggler who was part of the supply chain between Kantō and the anti-China faction. A prefectural cop eager to score points would probably have leaped at the chance to arrest him, but Kusanagi wasn't interested in the

small fry. Section 9's policy was to let the minnows swim while they fished for the big fish.

Kusanagi continued walking as if she hadn't noticed anything.

There were probably five or six people surrounding her.

She had a limited number of shots in her gun. And if her assailants were cyborgs, Glock bullets would probably be useless against them anyway.

That left her knife . . .

Ka-tchak.

The metallic sound of someone sliding a bolt interrupted her thoughts.

A submachine gun. With bolt action, no less! Immediately, Kusanagi's body sprang into motion.

The shot skimmed past just under her feet.

Her body was already in the air.

That should throw them off.

A blast of 9mm submachine gun fire echoed through the streets. Still, the refugees crouched at the side of the road showed no reaction.

Kusanagi landed inside a second-story window of a nearby building and looked back at the spot where she'd been standing moments ago. Her attackers materialized now, looking for their missing prey.

Armed refugees trying to bag a cyberbody, hmm?

Some poachers earned their livelihoods attacking people with even slightly superior cyberbodies, reducing them to parts to sell on the black market.

That was how things were in the Refugee Zone.

In Niihama and Fukuoka, the new capital, battlefields were a thing of the distant past. Even the Refugee Zone in Niihama wasn't this dangerous.

But the Kantō region had remained a battlefield, sealed off from the rest of the country. Here, it seemed, the war had never ended.

The refugees had been invited into the country to provide manpower for the reconstruction effort. If the people here took up arms and revolted, the disorder would spread to the other Refugee Zones like wildfire.

This Zone was a breeding ground of every kind of trouble.

A group of armed refugees had gathered in the spot where Kusanagi had just been. She noticed that one of the men seemed to be the leader—he was issuing directions to the rest of the group.

The men split into two groups to look for Kusanagi.

Meanwhile, Kusanagi approached the leader from behind. She closed in on him stealthily like a feline predator in a concrete jungle. He was heading up a group of three.

It was a motley crew, lacking in organization—none of them was keeping watch behind them. Their arsenal was just as improvised. Only the leader was packing a submachine gun; the rest of the men were brandishing steel pipes.

A mere 9mm submachine gun was no threat.

Unless it blasted her with a concentrated stream of fire in one focused spot, its bullets wouldn't even penetrate Kusanagi's cyberbody. Her titanium skeleton wasn't just for show, after all.

It would take a highly skilled gunman to pull such a feat.

Still, given that she was undercover with no prospects for maintenance or support, Kusanagi had to avoid expending needless energy.

She pulled the knife out of her sleeve.

It had a carbon blade and was treated so as not to glint in the light.

She drew up behind one of the men with steel pipes, reached around his neck, and applied pressure to his jugular. By blocking a person's oxygen supply for even a moment, it was possible to shut down their brain and render them unconscious.

After taking one of the men out, Kusanagi melted back into the shadows.

Next, she took the second man out the same way. The whole process took less than thirty seconds. Up ahead, the leader never noticed a thing.

He clearly wasn't a formidable opponent.

Kusanagi approached him from behind, grabbed his neck, and pulled him over backward as she swept his feet out from under him. When he landed on his back she pinned his arms down with her feet and yanked the gun out of his hands. In the same motion, she brought the carbon knife to his neck, immobilizing him.

She got right to the point. "Resist and you're dead. Blink twice for yes, once for no."

Kusanagi sank the knife into his neck just a single millimeter. The shallow cut blossomed with beads of red.

The man blinked twice for yes. There were tears in his eyes.

Kusanagi almost burst out laughing.

A minute ago he was attacking her, and look at him now! What a joke!

She pulled out a photograph and showed it to the man. It was a picture of the hit man who had attacked the anti-China faction base in Niihama.

"Do you know this man?"

One blink. That was a no.

She showed him an image of Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street, from the scene she had discovered in the Tachikoma's brain.

"What about this street?"

Yes.

"You know it?" She demanded.

" . . . Y-y-yes . . . But it's not in such good shape anymore," he stammered.

"Take me there." Kusanagi commanded.

"Fine . . . but that's Won Pin's turf," the man said.

"Won Pin?"

"He's the big boss of that road . . . and the whole area south of Ogikubo Station, including Ogikubo Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street. They say he's in league with the anti-China faction, too"

"Then take me to him."

"You?"

"Yes. Maybe he can tell me what I want to know."

"What's that?" the man asked.

Kusanagi glanced at the image of Lily-of-the-Valley Shopping Street.

"I want to know the significance of this place."

"... significance?"

"Can you take me there?" Kusanagi pressed down on the knife. It dug a hair deeper into the man's neck.

"O-okay, okay!"

Kusanagi removed the knife from his neck.

The man grasped at his neck. When he saw the thin trickle of blood, he let out a pathetic cry.

"Move it!" Kusanagi ordered from behind.

"W-what about my brothers?"

"Your brothers?"

"The guys that were behind me . . ."

"They're alive."

The man looked relieved. "Sorry about that," he said.

He didn't seem to be evil to the core.

"I'm the type who follows the top dog," he told her.

Kusanagi gave him his weapon back, and he put it away.

"I'll take you to Won Pin," he said. "But I can't guarantee that he'll take to you."

"I know," Kusanagi replied.

The man began to walk.

They came across the other group that had split off earlier. The two men raised their guns at Kusanagi, but their leader stopped them.

"Put your gun down, Tanaka. You, too, Sasajima."

The men called Tanaka and Sasajima lowered the weapons they were aiming at Kusanagi.

"I'm taking this lady to Won Pin."

"Won Pin? But Igarashi, didn't he tell you to get lost?"

So the leader's name was Igarashi.

" . . . it's fine," Igarashi said in a strained voice. Behind him, Kusanagi was holding the tip of her knife to his skin.

Igarashi stepped forward, forcing Tanaka to move out of his way. Kusanagi followed him. The two men were left just standing there.

Kusanagi and Igarashi continued westward on Oumekai Road, now completely shrouded in darkness.

"This whole area used to be full of ramen shops. It was pretty lively." When he realized that Kusanagi wasn't hostile, Igarashi's demeanor changed and he began to point out the sights of the ruined city of Ogikubo.

It was convenient to have found a guide, but Kusanagi didn't want his chatter to distract her from the goal of her undercover investigation.

"I was born and raised in this city," Igarashi told her.

"Before you became a thieving lowlife?"

"Lighten up, will you? We prefer the term 'vigilante patrol.' Lately, we're seeing more and more shady characters in these parts, sniffing around after the anti-China faction. We have to be on our guard."

"I thought you were a group of cyberbody-poaching armed refugees."

"Yeah, right! I'm not even a refugee. I'm a proud citizen of Tokyo."

"Is that so."

"Oh, hey, we need to take a left here."

The man turned down a side street just before a ramp leading up to a street labeled Amanuma Land Bridge. There were lights up ahead.

"That's Ogikubo Station," Igarashi said.

He pointed to the now defunct station, whose platform had just come into view. Only the concrete railway ties remained of the train tracks; the iron had long ago been scavenged by dismantlers and carried off as scrap material. The roof of the platform, too, had crumbled away, leaving only the concrete floor.

The buildings on one side of the station were still somewhat intact, and apparently dismantlers from other areas were using them as office space.

"This is a Redevelopment Promotion Zone. The military's run utility lines in just up to this point," Igarashi explained.

Peering down the street, Kusanagi could see signs for cheap flophouses and the like, shining in the light.

"The north gate of this station is a gathering place where the dismantling companies come to pick up workers. The labor shark comes out here early in the morning in a bus, loads them in here, and takes them to the dismantling site."

"I saw a bus full of laborers a little while ago on the road."

"Tokyo is loaded with resources, you know. There's still lots of scrap material that can be reused. The main worksite is up in Egota, north of Loop 7. But from what I hear, there's some heavy labor going on in the Loop 7 Sea, too, where they're dismantling the skyscrapers underwater. You make more money doing that,

but it's brutal work. They won't hire you unless your cyberparts ratio is really high."

"Are many of the laborers cyborgs?"

"Not at all. See for yourself."

In front of the station, workers and refugees were gathered around a large fire built in a metal drum.

"They're almost all flesh and blood," Igarashi told her. "People with no money are relatively safe on Won Pin's turf, the south exit neighborhood. It's become a haven for them."

"What about the north side?" Kusanagi asked.

"That's under military control."

Kusanagi looked at area that served as an oasis for these people.

After nightfall, the station's south gate was swarming with laborers looking for a spot to sleep or for drinking away the day's wages in cheap alcohol. The place emanated its own peculiar breed of vitality.

She was impressed by how much energy there was.

"Surprised? He has a way of drawing people to him."

"This is Won Pin's influence?"

Igarashi nodded. "They say he's a Chinese refugee, but I'm not so sure about that. He's an old son of a bitch, probably close to a hundred if he's a day. But whenever anyone tries to snoop around into his past, they're never heard from again. At first glance, he's just a gloomy old geezer, but . . . how can I put this? When he stares at you, there's this intensity . . . I bet he's a peninsula vet. He's a wily one, all right. Don't be taken in by his outward appearance."

"The aura of a person who's escaped the jaws of death time and again," Kusanagi said.

"Yeah. You have it, too," Igarashi added.

"Oh?"

Apparently, this Igarashi fellow was no dummy, either.

In fact, Kusanagi had stared death in the face and lived to tell about it numerous times during her stint in the military. When commanded to, she'd even killed young children. During war, sometimes a smiling child could be carrying a bomb. There was no room for empathy. When Kusanagi identified an enemy, she instinctively squeezed her gun's trigger.

That was how she had survived.

When she'd become a commander, she'd become responsible for the lives of the soldiers in her command. In a hierarchy that required absolute obedience of one's superiors, the soldiers entrusted their officers with their lives. That was the surest way to stay alive. And if you died, all you could do was curse your fate for being assigned to an incompetent commander.

This was always true during war.

And it was still true, even now.

Only wars were easier to fight since the lines between friend and foe were clearly drawn.

Since joining Section 9, Kusanagi had often had to battle enemies who were invisible to her.

This was one such instance.

"So what's the story on the anti-China militants out here?" she asked Igarashi.

"Why do you ask?" he wanted to know.

"Just curious."

"In that case, want me to introduce you to some?" Igarashi offered. "They could probably use a heavy-hitter like you."

"Introduce me?"

"Yeah. Lately Won Pin here has dealings with some pretty freaky-looking anti-China types."

"I see. In that case, I'll meet with Won Pin directly and speak with him about it."

"Yeah?"

As they drew closer to the station, Kusanagi got a more immediate sense of what a large crowd was gathered there. The staircase leading down to the underground floor of the Ogikubo Station, too, was flooded with laborers with chipped cups of cheap sake in hand. They drank it slowly, in tiny sips. Some of them were licking empty bowls.

That wasn't all.

Some were selling spoils pilfered from the dismantling sites.

Some were gambling, tossing dice into an empty cup.

Some huddled together, as if to lick each others' wounds.

There were so many of them, it made her wonder where they'd all come from.

"Everyone's scared. They survived today, but what about tomorrow?" Igarashi murmured.

"It's all right," Kusanagi said.

"What is?" Igarashi asked.

"This town," she said.

Asphalt covered in dust. Buildings with cracked concrete walls,

their exterior finish crumbled away.

Igarashi had chosen to stay, and the refugees that had nested here were already creating new infrastructure of their own.

The community had its own rules, and everyone followed them. Life revolved around the people who lived here, and that was precisely why there were no laws imposed on them by committees in board rooms, who had never actually set foot in their neighborhood.

It was full of life.

"You think so?"

"Yes."

But just because you liked a place didn't mean you could live there. Not in Kusanagi's world. She knew that you needed sharp instincts to survive in a state of anarchy.

Many years had passed since the old capital had been destroyed. The information she'd picked up from the Urban Administration Bureau in Niihama was so out of date it was practically fossilized. Kusanagi erased all of it, retaining only the basic data.

She could map it herself, with information from her own eyes, ears, and feet.

"Here we are." Igarashi stopped at a narrow road that branched off from the road alongside the station.

Kusanagi let out an inadvertent exclamation. "This is . . ."

She could make out the words on the dilapidated arch of the gate: Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street.

It was the same name she had seen in the memory at the virus' core.

And the same place.

The image in the memory had to have been from decades ago, but the street itself was unchanged. Signs for back-alley cyber-body clinics and cyberparts from who knows where now dangled from the eaves, but the overall ambiance remained. The stores still looked almost exactly the same.

The old-fashioned shopping street bustled with throngs of laborers, and a variety of businesses had sprung up to take advantage of the crowds and the demand for cybernetic parts.

Drunken laborers lolled in front of a local watering hole. The passersby paid them no mind, stepping over them as they milled past.

The orange-red glow of bare light bulbs seemed to give warmth to the chilly air. Some of these people would probably remain out in the cold all night, with no place else to sleep.

Behind them, raucous music blared from the street by the station. Through the gate, Kusanagi glimpsed a string of large station wagons adorned with neon, blasting hymns at top volume. When the laborers saw them, they began to gather. Even men sitting in the gutter rose to their feet unsteadily and tottered after the convoy.

"Those are the church folks around here. That's how they distribute their donated goods. 'All men are brothers,' that kind of thing. Very noble and all, but personally I've got no stomach for that business."

"Me neither," Kusanagi said.

"You and I think alike, eh?" Igarashi said.

Kusanagi didn't answer.

"Lily-of-the-Valley Street is one street over. It's wider and a bit nicer," he said.

"Mm-hmm."

Igarashi, who was walking ahead of her, paused to gaze up at one of the shops.

This place . . .

Kusanagi recognized it from somewhere.

Ah, yes.

It was the shop she'd seen in the memory.

Igarashi stroked one of its pillars, almost lovingly.

"What is this place?" Kusanagi asked.

"Oh . . . it's a place I used to come to a lot, a long time ago."

"I see," Kusanagi said. "I've opened this door before," she added.

"What?"

"Remember the image I showed you? It was from an imaginary space based on this street. This shop was in it, too."

" . . . What was it like?" Igarashi wanted to know.

Kusanagi shrugged. "That was right where the memory ended," she told him.

"Oh."

Kusanagi peered through the closed door.

She could see a distinctive siphon inside.

It was exactly as it had been in the memory.

"It looks like a nice place. Nobody uses it?"

"This is the only place Won Pin has prohibited anyone from touching."

"Won Pin?" Kusanagi repeated.

“That’s not all. We’re not allowed to destroy a single building on this dingy little street. I don’t know why. But just beyond that river is Won Pin’s house.”

At the end of the street, there was a small bridge with a sign that read “Zenpuku-ji River.” The shallow river was still there, and Kusanagi was impressed to see koi swimming in it.

“I’m not sure why, but nobody ever tries to catch those fish to eat. People just feed ‘em—that’s why they’re so goddamn fat.”

Yes, they were definitely fat.

In other words, there was enough to eat, if nothing else. Volunteers and groups like the church people they’d seen earlier made occasional visits to the Refugee Residential Zones. Like a battlefield, the Zones were off-limits to the general public. They couldn’t ensure your safety. But the constant trickle of visitors never stopped; perhaps because this place made people feel truly alive.

If you did volunteer work in downtown Niihama, you might as well be invisible. You might receive jeers, but never a word of thanks.

A living city.

The vitality of a city was based on its residents really feeling alive.

What did that say about Niihama, the place where Kusanagi lived? People lived there. But it was more like they were being kept alive. In Niihama City, you always had to depend on something to survive.

If anything ever happened to the Net infrastructure, the

residents of Niihama would probably fall into a state of emotional instability. They couldn't even give up their portable terminals when they ventured out to spend time in the great outdoors—a symptom of Net Dependency Syndrome. People didn't want to see the face of the person next to them, but they needed to feel connected to survive. That was how things were in the city these days.

If Kusanagi hadn't experienced war, she might have ended up like that, too.

But she had purpose.

There was another reason she'd come here: to see the Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street, the place from the hidden memory.

After they'd crossed the Zempuku-ji River, there were fewer and fewer people on the road as they neared Won Pin's house.

Over the past few moments, Kusanagi had begun to sense that someone was watching them. It was just a vague feeling, but she was sure of it. Somebody . . .

"Here it is." Igarashi was pointing to an old four-story apartment building next to a small park by the river. Other than the fact that it was right next to Loop 8, there was nothing distinctive about it.

On the other side of the river lay the grounds of a former elementary school. Now it was a refugee camp, lined with rows of tents. But even though the building commanded a good view, there were no security personnel or devices. It appeared to be completely unprotected.

"Won Pin lives here?"

"Yeah. Wait here while I speak with him first." Igarashi said, and walked off toward the building. Kusanagi was left alone outside.

She could still hear the bustle of Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street behind them.

A parade of garish lights and hymns rolled past on Loop 9—the same station wagons they'd seen earlier. Modulated by the Doppler effect, the music was grating to Kusanagi's ears. They were like self-satisfaction and condescension on wheels, she thought.

Igarashi motioned to Kusanagi from inside the building. "Won Pin will see you. Apartment 401."

"What about you?" she asked.

"I'm afraid I can no longer be of service. I have an understanding with this crowd, but we're not exactly buddy-buddy."

"Thank you for going out of your way."

"Don't mention it. I make a habit of obeying those who are stronger than me. It's the secret to a long life."

Igarashi disappeared down the shopping street.

There were no lights in the building's stairwell, only the light from the city shining in from outside.

Kusanagi took her goggles out of her chest pocket. Outwardly, they looked simply like a large pair of sunglasses, but they featured night vision and thermal imaging capabilities. She turned on the night vision setting and mounted the steps carefully, one by one.

There were surveillance cameras, but she didn't detect any type of infrared or sound-wave security devices or traps.

Nothing?

She put away the goggles and climbed the stairs of the silent building to the fourth floor.

When she got to the top, the first apartment she came to had a plastic plate on the door that read Room 401.

Was it a trap?

With that question in the back of her mind, Kusanagi knocked at the door.

"It's open," the voice of an old man called from inside.

Kusanagi turned the metal doorknob and opened the door.

Light spilled out from the room into the corridor from the fluorescent light of the front entryway. A traditional storefront curtain was hung in the doorway. "Open for Business," it read, as if to be funny.

Kusanagi stepped into the entryway and carefully shut the door behind her. Beyond the curtain was a short corridor with doors on both sides. At the end of the corridor was a small kitchen with a sink mounted to one wall and a refrigerator. A table stood in the center of the room.

Just to be safe, Kusanagi walked in without removing her shoes.

"Take off your shoes, will you?" the voice called from inside the room.

There was probably a camouflaged surveillance camera-somewhere.

Kusanagi removed her shoes and entered the hallway. The doors in the hallway were marked with plates that read "toilet" and "washroom." As she approached the kitchen, she could see

that beyond it there were two sliding doors and a glass door, leading to rooms on the other side.

A 3DK floor plan—three rooms, plus a dining room and kitchen.

Through an open sliding door, Kusanagi could see into a tatami mat room.

From inside, the voice called out again. "Don't just stand out there. Come in!"

As Kusanagi followed the voice toward the room's entrance, she felt like she had stepped into a different era. A little old man sat leaning back in a floor chair, his legs under the quilt of a *kotatsu*, a traditional low table with a heater underneath.

She wouldn't have been surprised if he were close to a hundred years old.

"You're Won Pin?"

"Indeed. And you are?"

"Call me Kusanagi."

"Hmph. Not your real name, I suppose. But you're a guest. Sit down and make yourself comfortable." He indicated the other side of the *kotatsu* table.

The instant Kusanagi set foot in the room, she was struck by a stabbing wave of bloodthirsty malice.

"She's my guest!" Won Pin shouted toward the other room.

Kusanagi could see into the next room now. A solitary young man with a ferocious gaze sat inside.

"That's Baoshi. He insists on hanging around and playing bodyguard even though I've told him it's unnecessary. Pay him no mind."

Baoshi continued to glower malevolently at Kusanagi.

Kusanagi was impressed.

Even in the bars run by small-time gangsters in Niihama, there weren't many bodyguards who looked this tough. She got the impression that Baoshi might even give Batou a run for his money.

"Igarashi filled me in on the gist of things. What is it that you wanted to ask me?" Won Pin asked.

Kusanagi sat down in front of Won Pin, still bathed in Baoshi's painfully ferocious gaze, and withdrew a photograph from her shirt pocket.

It was the picture of the man who had attacked the anti-China faction's headquarters.

"Do you know this man?"

Won Pin picked up the photo and gazed fixedly at it.

"... I don't know his name. But I've seen him."

"He frequented an anti-China base," Kusanagi said.

"Then I would have seen him. You know about me and the anti-China faction, right?"

Kusanagi nodded. "I've heard a rumor that you control them from behind the scenes."

"I do no such thing. I merely grace them with what wisdom an old geezer can offer."

"I understand that you protect this town," Kusanagi said.

"True."

"Then perhaps you'll recognize this."

Kusanagi showed Won Pin the image from the memory that recreated Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street.

"O-ho! Very well made!" Won Pin said.

"I found this in one of that man's memories," Kusanagi said. "But no such memory exists on any of the Niihama Nets. If it's anywhere to be found, I believe it must be on a Local Net in this area."

"Why do you want to find it?" Won Pin asked.

"I want to dive it," Kusanagi said.

"Why?"

"It's a Net I wandered into once by accident. The only thing I know about it is that it was modeled after this place—after Ogikubo Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street. I was finally able to confirm that just now when I came down that street on my way here. And that shop . . ."

"Shop?"

"The one that you've forbidden anyone to tamper with," Kusanagi said.

"Oh."

"I want to know who the person was inside," she said.

"Person?"

"On the Net, there was a woman inside the shop, alone. But the memory ended just as I opened the door."

"Why do you want to know that?" Won Pin asked.

"No special reason. I'm just interested," Kusanagi replied.

"Mm-hmm . . ."

Won Pin was silent.

Kusanagi sensed Baoshi's tension rise in the next room. He was probably preparing to attack her depending on Won Pin's next response.

"All right, there, don't get so worked up," Won Pin chastised Baoshi, and the latter's energy receded.

"Now, about this Net you're looking for," Won Pin continued. "Around here, there are a number of Local Nets that center around the refugees—everything from the Rescue Net hosted by that crew that blasts those pesky hymns, to the Refugee Counseling Center Net created by the Redevelopment Bureau. That's how it works in this area. Because there's no infrastructure, everyone has to use Local Nets. So people congregate where there's information. In other words . . ."

"Where people congregate, there are Nets. Right?" Kusanagi surmised.

"Exactly. You're from Niihama, aren't you?" Won Pin said.

"Yes."

"Now in places like Niihama, people don't have to move an inch—there's more than enough infrastructure. But when it comes to information, when you need it, you have to go to the right place at the right time to find it. It's not something you can just obtain sitting behind a desk. Because you need to verify whether or not your information is factual. On the Nets, all you have is plain information. But *facts* are something that you perceive through your own eyes and ears—through your own senses."

"I agree," said Kusanagi. "That's why I came here to search."

"Impressive," said Won Pin. "Then search you will. I can't help you, but I won't get in your way, either. You have my consent. Baoshi?" Won Pin said.

Baoshi nodded. Then he opened a window and threw himself out of it.

"When will he learn to control that temper!" Won Pin clucked. He stood up and closed the window.

"I'm fond of this town," he said, still gazing out the window, his back to Kusanagi. "I don't tolerate people who disturb it. See that you don't become one of those people."

Kusanagi felt a kind of indescribable pressure emanate from Won Pin's back.

"Yes. I'll be careful," she said.

Kusanagi left Won Pin's apartment and walked out into Loop 8.

Highway Loop Number 8, or Loop 8 for short, was one of the peripheral roads that circumscribed Tokyo. It formed an even bigger circle, outside of Highway Loop Number 7, or Loop 7.

Loop 8 was broken in places and didn't form a complete circle anymore. When the schedule was set for Tokyo's redevelopment, Loop 8 would be repaired as a key external roadway. But at this stage, even the planning phase was still incomplete.

Kusanagi walked down Loop 8 to get back to Ogikubo Station's north gate. She'd acquired the knowledge that most of the lodging in Ogikubo was on the north side of the station. South of the station was the district where the laborers gathered—where the people of Ogikubo lived.

When Loop 8 reached the train tracks, it dipped underground. Walking through the dark underground tunnel, Kusanagi came to a stop right in the middle.

There was someone there.

She sensed another presence behind her, too.

The one in front of her looked like a laborer, but he didn't carry

himself like one. His vertical profile was extremely steady, as if he were exercising strict control of his center of gravity as he approached.

"Two," Kusanagi murmured.

The man who looked like a laborer stopped walking.

He was eight meters away. Both men were standing on higher ground than Kusanagi.

"May I help you?" Kusanagi asked.

The man in front of her spoke. "You're a guest of Won Pin?"

"Why do you ask?" Kusanagi said.

"No reason. We just wanted to know what the two of you discussed. Would you mind coming with us?"

"Is that some new pickup line?" Kusanagi responded. "Can't you think of any better way to request my company?"

"Hmm. Like what?" the man asked.

"Let's see. Like brute force, for example?" Kusanagi offered.

"That's amusing," the man said. "I didn't want to get rough with you, but you asked for it."

He strode toward Kusanagi. He was wearing something on his hands—they gave off a shower of blue sparks like a jolt of electricity.

Stun gloves.

As Kusanagi was focused on the man in front of her, she heard a small metallic sound from behind. Instinctively, she leapt into the air.

The shot ricocheted off of the asphalt.

Kicking off of the low ceiling, Kusanagi sprang toward the man with the gun. He hadn't been expecting to miss at such

short range and wasn't quick enough to follow Kusanagi's movements.

"Above you!" the other man shouted.

The man tried to point his gun at Kusanagi but looked up only in time to see the sole of her shoe coming toward his face.

Her heel registered the crunching of a smashed nose, and the man was sent sprawling on the pavement. In the same motion, Kusanagi snatched the gun from his hands.

A Sebro M5!

She grasped the gun. The other man was right in front of her, closing in with his stun gloves.

There was no time to think.

A savage wind breezed past the side of her face.

Kusanagi tipped her body over backward and squeezed her trigger with 2.5 kilos of force. Two continuous blasts shook the tunnel.

The 5.4mm high-speed armor-piercing bullets fired double-tap sliced through the chin of the man with the stun gloves. They exited through the top of his head and met the ceiling of the tunnel along with a fountain of blood.

The blood streamed down from above, staining the asphalt a dark red and raining down mercilessly on Kusanagi as well. She paid it no mind as she flipped the man with the broken nose over onto his back and inserted a cable into his neck.

His cyberbrain became visible. Kusanagi could see layers and layers of barriers.

Just then, Kusanagi was enveloped in a mounting surge of mecha-pressure.

An attack barrier!

The man's connective terminals had been booby-trapped. The mechanism began to simultaneously bombard both the invader and the cyberbrain's owner.

It was a suicide bomb barrier.

Keeping just a hair's breadth ahead of the onslaught, Kusanagi continued to collect information. She still wanted to know who this man was.

The system ate away at the brain's data like a ravenous parasite.

Not yet.

Kusanagi searched the top layer of the man's memory for the most recognizable scrap of personal data—his name.

She found one.

It was probably a false name—an alias that he used on the job. The fact that it was deliberately positioned at the most superficial level of his memory suggested that he'd made a conscious effort to use it reflexively.

That wasn't it.

Kusanagi dove into the next layer down.

The mecha-pressure intensified.

It was difficult to move. The self-exploding barrier continued to detonate. Its destruction was spreading, and information everywhere was being annihilated.

Where is it?

Kusanagi registered a datum, but just as she reached for it, it ceased to exist.

—!

The blast that had obliterated the datum surged toward Kusanagi.

Disengage.

Kusanagi focused all of her energies on withdrawing from the man's cyberbrain.

Everything went white.

The instant the sight of the tunnel entered her vision, Kusanagi yanked the cable out of the man's neck. The plug incinerated in a shower of blue sparks. The blackened remains gave off the stench of burnt protein.

Her face streaked with blood, Kusanagi looked down at the two men. They had been ready to self-destruct before letting their secrets be exposed.

She looked at the Sebro M5 in her hand.

Sebro firearms were only used by Public Safety personnel working to protect the state.

Could it be?

Foreign Affairs Section 6 . . .

But why were they monitoring Won Pin?

Looks like Won Pin and I need to have another talk.

Kusanagi headed back the way she had come.

Chapter 9



"Any word from the Major?"

"Nothing yet, sir," the cold voice of the android operator responded to Batou's question.

Batou was pacing restlessly around Section 9's strategy room.

A hand thrust a can of coffee toward him.

"Hrmm?" Batou looked up. It was Togusa.

"Hey, Big Guy . . . Try to relax a little. I know you're worried, but you know how the Major is. I'm sure she's doing fine."

"Who's worrying about the Major? I want to know what the anti-China militants are up to, that's all!" Batou insisted.

"Sure, sure. But ever since that vampire guy blasted up the anti-China base, Saito tells me you've been doing nothing but investigating the gunman—even though we've got our hands full of other threads to follow," Togusa argued.

"It's my job—and the Major's—to investigate the vampire incidents. I'm passionate about my work, okay?"

"Then I've got a job for you two."

Batou and Togusa looked up. Aramaki was standing in the strategy room's doorway.

"Yesterday, Paz and Borma were monitoring Itakura to watch for attacks by vampires or anti-China militants when they detected Section 6 maneuvering nearby."

"The Section 6 crowd was there?" Batou said.

"Yes. They seemed to be trying to approach Itakura, but they couldn't make a move because our men were on the scene," Aramaki explained.

"If they're trying not to attract our attention, they must be up to something they don't want us to know about," Togusa said. "What's the assignment, Chief?"

"Want us to rough 'em up?" Batou's lips curled into a smile.

"You've probably heard that the Major's gone out to the Kantō Refugee Residential Zone to track down the whereabouts of Roy Tairagi," Aramaki said. "But even if she brings him in, at this point, Itakura is the only person left who can testify that the military intended to use those micromachines Tairagi developed. Without the living testimony of both Tairagi and Itakura, what happened back then will never see the light of day."

"I get it," Batou said. "And if Section 6 gets ahold of those micromachines, they'll just put them to use."

"Exactly," Aramaki confirmed. "They don't want Tairagi—they're after the formula for those micromachines that's packed away in his brain shell. I want the two of you to monitor Section 6's movements."

"I've got no intention of letting Section 6 pull a fast one on us," Batou agreed. "You got it. Let's go."

"Right," Togusa said.

"Chief, one thing . . ." Batou added.

"Yes?"

"Depending on what Section 6 is up to, I may head out to Kantō as well."

" . . . If it comes to that, you have my consent," Aramaki said.

Batou and Togusa exited the strategy room.

Aramaki stood alone at the window and looked out.

White skyscrapers stretching into the sky.

The war had changed everything.

Why had a man who had lived through the misery of war chosen to emerge from his slumber now?

Behind this case, Aramaki could sense Roy Tairagi's hatred.

Chapter 10



The hot water of the shower washed the blood out of Kusanagi's hair and ran down her naked body in rivulets. She wondered about the man whose blood it was. What had he thought, what had he felt as he died?

As she watched the blood mix with the water and swirl down the drain, Kusanagi was unable to feel sadness or remorse. He'd attacked her and she'd shot him. It certainly wasn't the first time.

His blood had drenched her, and she had survived. That was reality. If he was a professional, he had to have been prepared for that eventuality. The man who'd suicide-bombed his own cyber-brain had been prepared to die, too.

Still, she experienced no thrill from putting people to death, and she didn't do it if she didn't have to. But when someone came after you with the intent to kill, you had to do what had to be done.

Kill or be killed.

That was the rule you had to live by in Kusanagi's world.

She turned the tap and shut off the water.

Just then, she heard footsteps outside. She grabbed the Sebro M5 she had brought with her into the bathing area.

"Here's a change of clothes for you," Won Pin's voice called from the changing room on the other side of the frosted glass door.

"I appreciate it." Kusanagi set the Sebro back down.

"Don't mention it. I'm ashamed that you were assaulted while visiting my neighborhood."

Kusanagi wrapped herself in her towel and stepped out into the changing area. Won Pin was still standing there.

Kusanagi regarded him coolly. "I can't get dressed with you in the way."

"Pardon me." Won Pin left the room.

"If you want to watch, be my guest—if you care to look at a standard store-model complete cyberbody."

Kusanagi dried herself quickly and put on the clothes Won Pin had provided. The camouflage outfit she'd been wearing was covered in blood and she'd asked Won Pin to dispose of it for her.

She entered the living room towel drying her wet hair. Won Pin was sitting at the *kotatsu* table, watching refugee broadcasting on television, just as before.

Baoshi was nowhere to be seen.

"Baoshi went to take care of the corpses. They'll fetch a pretty

penny from the body disposal dealers since they were cyborgs."

"In this town, even corpses are reused, eh?" Kusanagi commented.

"Naturally. Dead people are just bodies. It's the job of the living to clean up after them."

"That's quite the philosophy," Kusanagi said.

"It's also our job to remember the dead," Won Pin added.

"... Very true."

Won Pin fell silent, staring at the TV set.

When Kusanagi had knocked at his door, drenched in blood, Won Pin's expression had never flickered as he directed her to take a shower, explaining that he didn't care for the stench of blood.

Who was this man?

Won Pin noticed Kusanagi's gaze.

"What? Are you trying to seduce an old geezer?"

"I like older men," Kusanagi returned.

"Hmph. I think you still have something you want to ask me," Won Pin deduced.

"You can tell?"

"Yes. The men who attacked you were monitoring me, weren't they?" he asked.

"I take it you're accustomed to being monitored?" Kusanagi asked.

"Like I'm accustomed to breathing." Won Pin turned his gaze sulkily back to his television program—an amateur singing competition hosted by refugee broadcasting. The screen showed a

close-up of a refugee yodeling rapturously in an unbearable, mosquito-like voice.

"Foreign Affairs Section 6."

Won Pin looked at Kusanagi.

"Those men were from Public Safety Section 6," she told him.

"... Is that so?"

Kusanagi set the Sebro down on the *kotatsu*. "This gun is a custom piece from a company that makes them for Public Safety personnel."

"How do you know that?" Won Pin asked.

"Good question," Kusanagi responded.

"Fine. You don't have to tell me. I owe you a favor for ridding me of those bothersome pests."

"I used your shower."

"That's not enough." Won Pin got up and went into the room next to the kitchen.

"Where did that Baoshi put it?" he muttered.

Kusanagi could hear him rummaging around. She peeked inside. Inside the small room, an industrial shelving unit was practically buried in various gadgets. It looked like a pile of garbage to her.

"That's quite the junk collection," she marveled.

"An old fart's got to have a hobby. O-ho! Here it is!" Won Pin picked up a small terminal and handed it to Kusanagi.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's a record of local Network logs," he told her.

"A Network log? Why do you have this?"

"I used it to tap those pests' memories through the local Nets."

I'm just about finished, so the terminal is useless to me now. You can look in there for the Net address you're trying to find. Whether or not you can find it depends on you. That's as much as I can do."

"I won't say thank you," Kusanagi said.

"This is a matter of debt and repayment—I'm simply repaying what I owe you. I don't want your thanks—in fact, I'd prefer it if you'd be on your way now, before Baoshi gets back."

Kusanagi nodded and left Won Pin's apartment.

As she left the building, she surveyed her surroundings. There didn't seem to be any Section 6 agents monitoring the area.

Most likely, the two she had encountered had been the only ones assigned undercover out here. Of course they weren't working alone, but their teammates were probably elsewhere. If the pair had been reporting back to the others at regular intervals, Kusanagi estimated that she only had an hour or two before their absence was noted and other agents began to investigate.

She had to get out of this area before they traced the pair's trail back to Won Pin, and then to her.

Still . . . that image of Ogikubo City in the memory she'd seen. She was sure that the data's source was somewhere in the Local Nets of this region.

Kusanagi entered a nearby bunkhouse with a sign that read "Net Access."

In these parts, a business hotel was an unheard of luxury. Such establishments only existed in the vicinity of the Tokyo Linear Train Station. Out here, unregistered flophouses were the high-end accommodations.

Beds lined a long hallway, leaving a passage only a shoulder's breadth wide to walk down. The owner seemed to have crammed in as many beds as possible in order to serve the maximum number of guests. Still, the prices were cheap enough that most of the beds were occupied—business seemed to be booming.

It was no wonder the place was so inexpensive: the wooden floor felt like it might collapse at any moment, and the walls were so thin you could probably hear people breathing on the other side.

Apparently, their idea of "Fully Net Equipped" was simply running infrastructure lines to each bed. Kusanagi doubted the Net access was even legit; more likely, they were simply splicing into the lines the military had run to the developments on the north side of the station.

Wooden doors were scattered here and there along the dim, cramped hallway. Behind one, four bunk beds were crammed into a small room, leaving no space for any other furniture.

Kusanagi rented the entire room and crawled up into a bunk labeled #114. She sprawled out on the less-than-pristine sheets, drew the curtain shut, and connected her cyberbrain to the terminal Won Pin had given her.

Kusanagi visualized the gates to each of the Net links as doors.

The doors stood in an immeasurable horizontal array that stretched out in every direction, its borders beyond the limits of her visual field.

"If I open these one by one, I'll never finish in time," Kusanagi muttered to herself.

From her own cyberbrain, she retrieved the memory she'd obtained at the core of the vampire virus. It embodied the sentiment that had spawned the virus' creation.

The engineer had been motivated by vengefulness.

Kusanagi propagated the kernel by replication.

One became two.

Two became four.

Four became eight. On and on, the kernels doubled.

When she'd repeated the process fifty times, she threw the 112,589,906,842,624 kernels at the doors.

More than a hundred trillion points of light shot out from Kusanagi toward the matrix of doors.

When a kernel hit a door that didn't match its search parameters, the door gave off an error message and vanished.

Kernels that didn't find a door dwindled out naturally.

The explosion ran its course in a blink of an eye, before even a complete second had elapsed.

Only one door remained.

Even among that multitude of doors, the data existed only in a single Net.

"I don't know what you're trying to scream from the ends of the earth, but you won't communicate it like this," Kusanagi murmured, diving through the door.

The mecha-pressure surged.

That's a lot of protection.

There were layers and layers of barriers. Even if someone hap-

pened across this Net, nobody could peek inside.

Except for the Net's creator.

The barriers weren't physical walls—they were programs designed to eliminate intruders, expelling anyone who didn't have the right gate key to get inside. Not surprisingly, each one of them was different.

One by one, Kusanagi bored holes through the barriers.

She had to get to the answer that lay on the other side.

That fragment at the nucleus of the virus created by Roy Tairagi.

Kusanagi didn't know what era it was from, but it was a memory of the neighborhood of Ogikubo in Tokyo, the former capital.

Why this neighborhood? Why this town? Why did it have to be this city?

She still couldn't figure out why Ogikubo was so important to Roy Tairagi.

The man who had created the vampire virus and left a memory fragment at its core. He had probably planted that same kernel in Minori Mikisaka and Kashimura's adopted daughter.

Suddenly, the mecha-pressure subsided, and the resistance ebbed.

Kusanagi had broken through the final barrier.

Everything was flooded with a blinding light.

Waves of heat and dazzling brightness streamed down from the summer sun.

A narrow road stretched out in front of Kusanagi. It was barely wide enough for a single car. Both sides of the street were lined by rows of shops.

There was no arcade overhead, and the world flags decorating the street drooped listlessly in the summer sun.

It was the same scene Kusanagi had seen at the core of the virus she'd unleashed in the Tachikoma.

She looked back.

Before, there had been nothing there. But on this Net, she could see Ogikubo Station and the rest of the city.

Kusanagi gazed into the distance and scanned the array.

It had no depth.

In terms of distance, too, it was much closer than she had expected.

Kusanagi attempted to zoom in, but she couldn't obtain details of the data composition.

A backdrop.

It was exactly like a stage set in a play or movie. In order to conserve data, an image of the background was used as texture, pasted to a miniaturized model. By programming it to auto-generate, it served as a fairly lifelike replica of the real place.

When Kusanagi tried walking toward the station, she came to an invisible wall.

So this is the border.

There was no need for this space to be truly realistic.

It merely had to *seem* real.

Kusanagi could hear the chirping of cicadas, but she couldn't

see them.

They, too, were only a stage effect, designed to evoke a summer atmosphere.

Ogikubo Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street.

The arched gate was just in front of her.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Kusanagi stepped forward on the blistering asphalt and entered the street paved with concrete blocks.

The street was lined with signs: a credit bank, an Italian restaurant, a sushi chain.

There were no people.

Peering through the window of the Italian restaurant, Kusanagi could see a table top lined with plates of pasta and steaming cups of coffee. But here, too, there wasn't a person in sight.

Kusanagi attempted to open the door, but it wouldn't budge.

Another prop.

Trip the flag, and the memory would automatically replay—Kusanagi extrapolated this from the video memory she'd seen the last time.

Was it the shop's door?

Was it in the road?

She continued walking down the street.

The sound of wind bells. It was just like before.

The bells chimed even though there was no wind, filling the street with their silvery music.

Nothing was happening.

After a short while, Kusanagi came to a sign indicating the entrance to Ogikubo High School.

The gate was slightly ajar. Beyond it, a small bridge was visible.

Zenpuku-ji River . . .

Kusanagi stopped walking in the middle of the bridge and looked back the way she had come. From the shopping street's entrance to where she was now, it couldn't be more than five hundred meters.

Beyond the river, she could see Loop 8—though this, too, was probably a backdrop.

On the other side of the small park on Zenpuku-ji's bank stood an apartment building. Won Pin's building.

It looked just the same in the memory as it had in the real world.

She started toward it . . .

Suddenly, her visual field was flooded with light.

When the brightness dissipated, she could make out a sign.

Ogikubo Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street.

The words arched over a rounded gate.

*The river's the limit. Step beyond it and get bumped back to Start.
Then the answer has to be somewhere in this shopping street.*

Kusanagi began to walk again, but nothing was any different.

Again, she made her way down the street paved with concrete blocks.

Attentively, she checked each door and gate, but not a single one of them opened.

Just as before, she arrived at the banks of the Zenpuku-ji River.

If Kusanagi continued walking, she'd be carried instantly back to the shopping street's entrance once more.

She was sure she hadn't missed anything.

Guess it's back to square one . . .

Kusanagi was about to step forward when she changed her mind. Instead, she turned around and began to walk back up the street the way she'd come.

Everything still looked the same.

The same number of side streets, the same number of shops.

Then, just as she passed the intersection where Ogikubo Station came into view . . .

A cat meowed behind her. Kusanagi turned.

A black cat returned her gaze.

The flag.

The cat regarded Kusanagi with its blue-green eyes.

Then, as if inviting her to follow, it began walking back up the street toward the river.

In the other memory, when Kusanagi had followed this cat, it had led her to a particular shop.

They were probably headed for that same shop again. Kusanagi followed.

The cat ignored her, walking at its own pace. It held its tail rigidly in the air as its four paws padded rhythmically on the concrete blocks lining the road.

The wind bells began to chime.

They had to be close now.

The cat stopped.

It looked up at the glass door of a shop to their right.

Kusanagi looked, too.

It was a small coffee shop. Above it, the shop's name was painted on a time-worn canvas awning: "Twilight."

Through the glass, Kusanagi could see the interior with its counter-only seating.

The siphon was there, too.

It was exactly as before.

If this continues, it'll be Game Over again.

The woman inside began to check her watch.

The cat pawed at the door on two legs.

Kusanagi summoned her resolution and opened the door.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling! A sweet-sounding bell tinkled.

Immediately, the cat slipped inside.

The woman looked toward the door, her face full of joy. When she saw Kusanagi, her expression clouded momentarily, but she quickly regained her composure and smiled again. "Welcome," she said.

Kusanagi sat down on one of the stools in front of the counter.

The black cat was nowhere to be seen.

"What can I get you?"

"Blended coffee, iced."

"Coming right up."

Something was strange.

Kusanagi could feel it, but she didn't know what it was.

She could sense that something was unnatural.

No, she thought, it's nothing. This was a made-up world—it stood to reason that it should feel slightly off.

The woman laid a coaster with the shop's name on it on the counter and set a thick-rimmed glass of iced coffee on top. The amber liquid danced enticingly around the ice cubes.

"Are you new to this neighborhood?" she enquired.

"Yes."

"It's certainly busy, isn't it," the woman said.

"No, not really . . ."

The woman glanced at her watch.

"Oh!" Kusanagi exclaimed softly.

"Yes?" the woman said.

"Nothing."

She had finally realized what it was that felt strange.

As a test, she took a drink of her iced coffee. She felt the cool liquid trickle down her throat.

But when she looked at the glass, it was still full.

Of course.

Kusanagi checked her watch.

It had to have been five minutes since she'd come inside, but not even the second hand had budged on the coffee shop's clock.

The moment she'd entered the shop, time had frozen.

No actual time was elapsing. The flow of time didn't function in this conditional space.

The woman looked at her watch again.

Kusanagi spoke. "Are you waiting for someone?"

" . . . Yes," the woman said. "Actually, my husband's coming home soon."

"Your husband?"

The woman's cheeks flushed bashfully. "Yes."

"Is that so."

The woman smiled happily, ducking her head, and began to polish the cups.

Perhaps it was Roy Tairagi.

Perhaps this world Tairagi had created was a page from his own memory. Had he created this Net just to display this dusty old melodrama?

Not likely. Kusanagi rejected her own conjecture.

Then what was hidden here?

The woman in front of her was probably a programmed AI.

Kusanagi took the plunge. "You mean Roy Tairagi?"

The woman stopped polishing. "You know him?"

"I've heard about him from Itakura," Kusanagi said.

"Mr. Itakura? My, it's been a long time since I've seen him!"

The woman brought out a photograph from under the bar.

It was a picture of the woman and three men: Kusanagi recognized two of them as Itakura and Kashimura. The other one had to be Roy Tairagi.

He was much brawnier than Kusanagi had imagined. He didn't look at all like an engineer who might invent a cyberbrain virus. And that oafish face—it struck her as somehow familiar.

"Mr. Itakura and Mr. Kashimura both work with my husband. I've had word that he's coming home today!" the woman said.

"Really?"

"It's been so long since I've seen him. There's something special I've been waiting to unearth together when he gets back."

"Something special?"

The woman blushed again and smiled.

"Both of us grew up in this neighborhood. We both went to the elementary school over behind the shop, where our son goes now. A long, long time ago, we made a promise—to open up a time capsule together."

"A time capsule?"

"We both buried our most treasured possessions. We promised each other that twenty years later, we'd dig them up and trade."

"And it's been twenty years?" Kusanagi asked.

"... Yes. But I'm worried that he might not come home. When he gets caught up in his work, he has a tendency to shut himself inside the lab for ages!"

"I see."

"There's something I want to tell him when I see him."

"Really?"

"Yes. But the answer's in the time capsule. So when we open it up, together—"

Klack

The hands of the clock came to life.

Kusanagi glanced at the calendar on the wall. One of the dates was circled in red.

That date . . .

Suddenly, a blazing whiteness overwhelmed everything.

Everything was flooded with a blinding light.

Waves of heat and dazzling brightness streamed down from the summer sun.

A narrow road stretched out in front of Kusanagi. It was barely wide enough for a single car. Both sides of the street were lined by rows of shops.

There was no arcade overhead, and the world flags decorating the street drooped listlessly in the summer sun.

Ogikubo Lily-of-the-Valley Shopping Street

Kusanagi was standing in the same spot all over again.

Was this all memory of this neighborhood Roy Tairagi had preserved . . . ?

A woman had been waiting here for him, eagerly anticipating his return.

But they had never been reunited.

Of course.

It had been the very day—the very hour—that Tokyo had been annihilated.

Some people subscribed to rumors that it had been a nuclear attack by the Americans. Others theorized that it had been missiles from China. Still others reported that it had been a meteor shower.

The truth was that nobody really knew.

Whatever it was, the massive land depression that resulted left more than half of Tokyo underwater, and the areas that didn't sink into the ocean were instantly obliterated.

Ogikubo, too, had been transformed into a city of death—bathed in thermal waves and radiation.

A strange feeling came over Kusanagi's cyberbrain.

Death.

Destruction.

Ruin.

Oblivion.

The moment these negative concepts took shape in her thoughts, Kusanagi experienced an uncomfortable sensation, as if insects were swarming over the surface of her consciousness.

A memory-ravaging malice.

Hatred.

The vampire virus—!

Immediately, Kusanagi disengaged from the Net.

It was dark.

She could see nothing but blackness.

Perhaps the lights had been turned off in the bunkhouse. But Kusanagi could still hear a fair bit of noise coming from outside.

And even if the lights were off, it shouldn't be this dark.

She couldn't see a thing.

Kusanagi waved a hand in front of her face, but she couldn't even see that.

My visual field is broken—

So that was the eerie sensation she'd experienced.

While Kusanagi had been diving the local Nets, she'd tripped a sophisticated trap in the Net Tairagi had created.

In the middle of a solo undercover mission, Kusanagi had lost her sight.

Chapter 11



It was as if bugs were crawling in the pits of her eye sockets—the unpleasant sensation still lingered in Kusanagi's cyberbrain.

Her visual field's control software had probably been overwritten.

They sabotaged my brain when I wasn't paying attention.

The Net containing the memory of Ogikubo Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street—when Kusanagi had infiltrated its barriers to get inside, she hadn't sensed any attack functions.

Hardware, then.

If so, the trap had to have been set by—

The wooden floorboards creaked, interrupting her thoughts.

Out in the hallway.

The sound was approaching Kusanagi's room.

Heavy footsteps.

She could barely hear the sound of the footsteps themselves, but the floorboards groaned under the person's heavy weight.

The sound was faint, but Kusanagi was certain of it.

This was one reason she had chosen this cheap bunkhouse.

Out of consideration for clientele who didn't want their identities known, the establishment wasn't outfitted with security devices such as surveillance cameras or thermo-sensors. In exchange, however, the creaky wooden floor announced the presence of intruders.

The footsteps drew closer and closer. Kusanagi reached for her Sebro M5.

There was no reason for any other guests to enter her room. Kusanagi had rented out all of the beds.

If the footsteps continued past the door, it was just another customer.

But if they stopped—

The creaking of the floorboards halted at the door to her room.

A savage roar—the thunder of a heavy machine gun letting loose.

Its blast shattered the door. The bed, floor, and walls were reduced to splinters by the barrage of bullets.

The curtain of Kusanagi's bed, too, was blown to tatters.

When the room was buried in debris, the gun was finally quiet.

The barrel of a .50 caliber heavy machine gun peeked into the room through the doorway.

With a weight of close to forty kilos, excessively powerful guns of this kind were usually mounted on a vehicle or tripod. Such guns had been in use for more than a hundred years, since before

World War II. But despite their antiquity, they were still as potent as ever, and quite a few remained in use even today.

The floor groaned as the gunman stepped into the bullet-torn room, the heavy weapon slung from a belt around his neck. The gun had been rigged so that he could operate it one-handed, with an extra grip and trigger mounted to its top.

It was Baoshi.

He grasped the curtain that hung in shreds over bed #114 and yanked it away violently. But Kusanagi was nowhere to be seen.

There was a hole in the wall. The boards had been smashed in, leaving an opening just large enough for a person to crawl through.

A laborer's face stared through the hole from the other side of the wall.

Baoshi pointed the barrel of the .50 caliber at the man. "Where's the woman?"

"S-she left." The laborer pointed a trembling finger toward the door.

Wordlessly, Baoshi trained a stony gaze on the man. The .50 caliber roared, severing the man's head neatly at the jaw and blowing the top of it cleanly away.

Without registering a hint of emotion, Baoshi left the room. His heavy footsteps disappeared down the corridor.

The laborer's finger still pointed toward the door. His only blessing was that he'd died before he could feel any pain, before he even knew what had hit him.

His body swayed and flopped limply against the mattress.

A cable ran from the plug at the back of his neck, the other end hidden under the bed. Kusanagi peeked her head out.

The man with the top half of his head blown off lay before her.

"I'm sorry this had to happen. But your eyes were a big help."

Kusanagi had kicked through the wall and slipped into the next room. She'd linked up to the cyberbrain of the sleeping laborer and taken command of him, hiding herself under the bed as she manipulated him like a puppet.

The ploy had enabled her to fool the gunman into thinking she'd escaped, and she'd used the man's eyes to identify her assailant. Both tasks were accomplished simultaneously.

One reason she'd chosen a bunkhouse with thin walls was that they provided a tertiary escape route, beyond just the doors and windows.

If Baoshi's attacking me, that means Won Pin wants me dead . . .

Questions surfaced in the back of Kusanagi's mind.

When she'd visited Won Pin's apartment to wash off the blood from her fight, Won Pin had exhibited no intent to harm her. In fact, she had deliberately taken off her Sebro and created openings for an attack, but Won Pin had declined to take the bait.

Perhaps he was uninvolved. Perhaps Baoshi was acting independently.

I'm probably better off asking Won Pin directly.

Kusanagi exited the room.

In the darkness of her sightless world, Kusanagi had to depend solely on the memories she'd accumulated since her arrival.

If she could only replace her damaged cybernetic parts, everything would be fine. But exposing her internal workings in a town like this would be asking for even worse trouble. Superficially, Kusanagi's cyberbody looked like a standard commercial model, but inside she was built exclusively of top-notch, custom-built parts.

Slowly, she began to walk.

She could keep track of her location by following the simplified map information stored in her memory and standardizing the length of each stride.

This was the street where she had traveled east from Oumekai Road.

For the most part, Kusanagi remembered how to get to Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street. There were a number of places that were foggy in her memory, but if she could get back to the shopping street's entrance, it was a straight shot to Won Pin's place.

From here, it was just under two kilometers.

But Baoshi was looking for her.

She'd succeed in eluding him momentarily, but he was bound to realize that she would head for Won Pin's building.

Baoshi's cyberbody was abnormally powerful.

She'd seen him jump down from Won Pin's fourth floor window, and he'd handled the .50 caliber with ease. Kusanagi estimated he'd make a good match for Batou; in terms of pure output, however, Baoshi would probably even come out ahead.

Kusanagi continued to advance through the darkness.

Gradually, her sense of hearing became heightened.

The slapping of shoes against asphalt.

Tires rolling down the road.

The breathing of the drunkards lying by the side of the road.

Boisterous shouts from within the bars.

The rustling clothing of passersby.

The faint sound of a cyberbody motor performing a specialized operation.

A trigger being pulled.

Her body was already in motion.

First her shoulder hit the asphalt. Then the gunshot sounded.

The distinctive hiss of a high-speed armor-piercing bullet slicing through the air—low-caliber, but with muzzle speed rivaling that of a rifle shot.

Screams filled the air, and immediately Kusanagi was surrounded by the sound of people running for cover.

The attacker had probably already moved from the position the shot had come from. He or she was hiding now, anticipating Kusanagi's counterattack.

Kusanagi stayed low to the ground and rolled until her body bumped up against what felt like a door. Immediately, she flung herself inside.

"W-what the hell?" someone shouted.

She pointed her Sebro M5 toward the voice. "Quiet!"

"H-hey . . . it's you!"

It was a familiar voice.

"Igarashi?"

"Y-yeah!"

"Is anyone outside?" she demanded.

"Outside?"

"Didn't you hear the gunshot?"

"There's nobody out there now."

The assailant had retreated quickly, waiting for Kusanagi's counterattack. It had been a feint to test how she would respond.

If it had been Baoshi, he would have pursued her to the death.

If it wasn't Baoshi, then, was it Section 6?

"Let me use your eyes," Kusanagi ordered Igarashi.

"Eyes?"

She held out a cable toward him. "Connect up."

"What gives? You come barging in, telling me—"

—*what to do*, he was going to say. But before Igarashi could finish his sentence, he found the barrel of Kusanagi's Sebro jammed into his mouth.

Kusanagi had simply estimated his distance and location based on the sound of his voice and thrust her gun in that direction.

With a groan, Igarashi inserted the cable into his cyberbrain plug.

Kusanagi entered his brain.

For now, all she needed was to borrow his sight.

Light returned to Kusanagi's visual field.

The first thing she saw was her own face.

It was black with grime. She hadn't cleaned it since hiding under the bed back at the bunkhouse.

"What a mess," she said.

"Huh?"

"Not you."

At least she could see where she was now, albeit through someone else's eyes. It wasn't ideal, but she had no option right now other than to use this man.

It was a small room, with maps of the area and diagrams of various floor plans pinned to the walls. Apparently, this place had originally been a real estate office.

Igarashi had said that the area south of Ogikubo station was Won Pin's turf.

Given that Igarashi had his digs here, Kusanagi supposed that this area was Igarashi's turf.

"How many men does Won Pin have?" she asked him.

"I really don't know the number. But they've got a ton of cash and they do business with the anti-China crowd, so they've got incredible firepower."

"Are there any groups that attack Won Pin?"

"Yeah, right!" Igarashi scoffed. "With an arsenal like that? No one stands a chance. Baoshi alone would crush them like a grape. In Ogikubo, we keep the peace through a policy of mutual non-interference."

"Won Pin's roots are Chinese, right? Why is he in cahoots with the anti-China crowd?" Kusanagi asked.

"I suppose the Chinese government targets him. The anti-China faction is dependent on Won Pin for information. You know that incident with the ship?"

"You mean the *SS Hope*?"

"Yeah, the *SS Hope*. They say they old devil orchestrated the whole thing. Otherwise, the anti-China faction would never have been able to pull off something that huge."

It was true that the *SS Hope* incident had won the anti-China militants a great deal of visibility. But did they really have the capacity to wield such influence alone?

Previously, Public Safety had been keeping an eye on the anti-China militants' activities. But they weren't a significant enough organization to monitor around the clock.

So Won Pin's existence had changed the anti-China militants.

"Does anyone have information on Won Pin's past?" Kusanagi asked.

"Nobody. I've been in Ogikubo a long time, but the only thing I know is that the old man showed up in these parts two or three years ago. Though he has mentioned that he used to live here a long time ago, too."

"In Ogikubo?"

"Yeah," Igarashi said. "He talks about how the Zempuku-ji River used to be different, or how he used to like going out in downtown Tokyo before everything was destroyed—you know how old men like to reminisce about the good old days. But that's all. He never goes into specifics about his actual past or things he did."

"I see. I guess I'll just have to ask, then," Kusanagi concluded.

"Ask who?" Igarashi asked.

"Ask Won Pin."

"Huh?"

Kusanagi took Igarashi's arm and stood up.

"Hey, wait a minute! You mean me, too?" Igarashi protested.

"I apologize for the inconvenience. I'll need you with me."

Kusanagi needed sight. With her hearing alone, she wouldn't be able to contend even with just Baoshi, let alone the Section 6 personnel who were targeting Won Pin.

"You have some men, too, I recall?" Kusanagi said.

"Yeah. A few . . ."

"Call them together."

"Fine, I can do that," Igarashi said. "But what for? We're just going to talk to Won Pin, right?"

"We're going to have to take care of Baoshi, first," Kusanagi said.

"Baoshi?"

"He came after me just a little while ago," Kusanagi explained.

"Baoshi!?" Igarashi sprang to his feet, brushing Kusanagi's arm away. "Just a minute. So when you came running in here a few minutes ago, that was Baoshi that was attacking you?"

"No, not that time. That was just Public Safety."

"Public Safety?!"

Weakly, Igarashi slumped down in the chair and cradled his head in his hands. Kusanagi couldn't see him, but Igarashi's visual field showed that he was staring at his own feet.

" . . . It's not that I mind getting my hands dirty. We have shootouts every so often with gangs from other neighborhoods. But taking on government types is another story! They'll step on

whoever it takes to wipe out an enemy; they'll stoop at nothing to achieve their ends. I've always done my best to avoid getting into run-ins with the government—"

"Chickening out," Kusanagi said.

"That's cold."

Kusanagi's visual field registered her own face. Sure enough, her expression was icy.

Igarashi was gazing at her.

"That's why I'm still alive," Kusanagi said. "But right now, I need you. And because I need you, I have no intention of taking on any battles we can't win."

"What do you want from me?" Igarashi asked.

"Be a man. Have some initiative," Kusanagi said.

"Initiative?" Igarashi echoed.

"Enough to win some turf. Now let's get moving."

Kusanagi took Igarashi's arm and headed outside.

Chapter 12



Tanaka looked down over Ogikubo Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street from the roof of what had once been a bowling alley, near the train station's north entrance.

In the rifle's sight, he centered the reticle on the arch over the street's entrance. "Why me?" he muttered.

A half hour ago, Igarashi, his boss, had instructed him to stand by on this rooftop with a rifle.

Tanaka and Sasajima had come to the Kantō area from Niihama looking for work, but here they were, involved in yet another shady operation.

When they had first arrived, with nowhere to go and no one to turn to, Igarashi had taken them into his fold. They'd put themselves at his disposal, ushering in a new life in the skids.

"Should we really be doing this?" Sasajima asked, peering through a pair of binoculars next to Tanaka. The two men were old buddies who had become inseparable over the years.

Tanaka answered without taking his eye away from the sight.

"What else can we do? We have to eat. As long as we're with Igarashi, at least we always have food on our plates."

"But we said we weren't going to do this kind of thing anymore . . ."

"It's not like he wants us to rub someone out," Tanaka said. "All we have to do is keep watch, right?"

"Yeah."

All they had been instructed to do was watch the laborers coming and going on the shopping street below.

"I wonder what the hell Igarashi's up to?"

A man and woman came into the rifle's sight. It was Igarashi and the woman he was with.

Igarashi and Kusanagi walked arm and arm, lurking in the shadows of Ogikubo's side streets. Kusanagi was wearing a wig Igarashi had scrounged up, masquerading as a working girl here to do business with the refugees. To passersby, the pair looked like a refugee laborer and his escort looking for a room to spend the night.

"Have your men assumed their positions?" Kusanagi asked.

"Yep."

Multiple video images opened in Kusanagi's cyberbrain—visual imagery from the eyes of Igarashi's cohorts.

One of them was tailing Kusanagi and Igarashi from behind. Nobody in his visual range was paying special attention to Kusanagi and Igarashi.

One watched the street from behind the counter of a bar in the center of the shopping street. Laborers with a day's wages

in their fists were gazing up at the shop's signboard, getting ready to spend their earnings on a bit of enjoyment. Others who hadn't made any money that day scoured the concrete pavement with vacant stares, looking for any change someone might have dropped.

This visual field was unstable, probably due to the alcoholic content in its provider's system. That was fine; Kusanagi just needed him to function as a stationary camera.

<Igarashi. A group of unfamiliar men just entered the shopping street.> Igarashi received a cybercomm from Tanaka, one of his men who was monitoring the street from the roof of a nearby building.

Kusanagi also received the cybercomm instantaneously, as well as the visual imagery.

The footage was steady. This Tanaka fellow might not be a bad sharpshooter.

"I think Tanaka might come in handy," she remarked to Igarashi.

"What did I tell you?" Igarashi replied.

Three men dressed as laborers passed under the archway at the entrance to Ogikubo Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street. But their stride and the way they eyed their surroundings set them apart from the refugees.

Section 6, Kusanagi thought.

The men walked with one hand concealed in their garments. Those hands were probably gripping Sebros.

Are they here for me, or for Won Pin?

Kusanagi issued a cybercomm. *<Where's Baoshi?>*

<Baoshi? Oh, Won Pin's bodyguard . . . I haven't seen him.>

<Baoshi went into Won Pin's building and hasn't come back out,>
messaged the man who was monitoring Won Pin's apartment.
<I've been watching it ever since I got the message from Igarashi. He went inside and hasn't emerged since.>

Baoshi had foreseen that Kusanagi would come back to Won Pin's place and had decided to wait for her there.

"Looks like he's not going to make it easy for me to see Won Pin," Kusanagi said.

"Of course not," said Igarashi. "Baoshi's a simple guy. He bases his actions on whether someone is a friend or enemy of Won Pin. Anyone who threatens Won Pin's way of life is an enemy. Those were Baoshi's words when I made my pact with Won Pin."

"Do Won Pin and Baoshi have any underlings?" Kusanagi asked.

"No," Igarashi said. "The anti-China militants are associates, but they don't work for Won Pin. They mind their manners with him because of the value of the mysterious information Won Pin commands, and because he's got Baoshi. That goes for the rest of us, too."

Kusanagi saw the Section 6 men enter Igarashi's visual field.

Igarashi must have noticed them, too—his body stiffened.

"Don't look," Kusanagi told him. The Section 6 agents were bound to take note of anyone who looked directly at them. Better to keep tabs on them in their peripheral vision.

The three men were keeping a sharp eye out.

That wasn't surprising; after all, two of their undercover operatives had disappeared. If they showed their cards now, the careful communications network they'd set up would be all for naught.

Normally, the group would have taken more time to reestablish their contact points. The fact that reinforcements had been sent in immediately told Kusanagi that monitoring Won Pin was a major priority for Section 6.

What was Section 6 after?

The three men left Igarashi's field of vision.

Kusanagi took control of Igarashi's body, steering his gaze.

The men from Section 6 were heading toward Won Pin's building. They couldn't be planning to attack him with just three men—but apparently losing two undercover operatives was motivating them to take drastic measures.

In fact, it had been Kusanagi who had taken out their men when they'd attacked her—although she'd certainly never anticipated a run-in with Section 6 out here.

Things had certainly taken an unexpected turn.

If she could just apprehend Won Pin before Section 6 got their hands on him, her battle would be won.

Kusanagi voiced this idea to Igarashi. "We'll pit Baoshi against the Public Safety agents."

"How?" Igarashi wanted to know.

"We'll get Public Safety to pick the fight."

"Do you really think it'll be that simple?" Igarashi questioned.

"Who knows? Why not?" Kusanagi responded noncommittally.

"Now, wait a minute . . ."

But Kusanagi wasn't interested in hearing out Igarashi's protests. "Just listen," she told him. "Face forward and walk. Don't look directly at their backs. Peer at the buildings. That's right—like you're looking for a place to spend the night with a woman like me."

Igarashi's vision panned back and forth. Every now and then, it captured the backs of the Section 6 men.

At the same time, Kusanagi borrowed the eyes of Igarashi's men.

"Tanaka's the one watching from above?" she confirmed.

"Yeah."

"Have him change location," Kusanagi instructed. "I want him in a spot where he can see Won Pin's building and apartment. And put another man in a location overlooking Loop 8."

Igarashi relayed the instructions to his men.

"Have your pal back there dozing in the bar cover our backs with the man behind us," Kusanagi continued.

Igarashi glanced back and signaled his men.

"Are they all armed?" Kusanagi asked him.

"Yeah. Tanaka definitely has a rifle. The others have various odds and ends."

"And you?" she asked.

"Me?" Igarashi threw a glance into the inside of his jacket. Through his eyes, Kusanagi could see a V2.61.

It was an old-fashioned Czechoslovakian sub-machine gun, also known as a Skorpion, reinforced to enable it to shoot high-speed armor-piercing bullets.

"My secret weapon," he told her. "They're cyborgs, right? A 9 mm wouldn't cut the mustard."

"No matter how well you reinforce it, if you let loose with a continuous stream of high-speed armor-piercing bullets, that thing's going to fall apart," Kusanagi warned.

"It's enough to handle three men," Igarashi assured her.

"And Baoshi, too?" Kusanagi asked.

"I'll talk things out with him." Igarashi thumped his chest confidently.

Kusanagi shrugged. "I'll leave it to you, then."

They would come to the Zenpuku-ji River soon.

What was Section 6's next move?

Just as Kusanagi asked herself that question, the Section 6 agents stopped walking. They were probably being extra vigilant since they were drawing near to Won Pin's building.

"What now?" Igarashi asked Kusanagi, still walking forward. If they stopped, too, they would arouse the men's suspicion.

"Take a right up there." The turn Kusanagi was indicated led into the grounds of the former elementary school, currently a refugee camp.

The corner was just beyond where the Section 6 operatives were standing.

One of the agents noticed Igarashi and Kusanagi. He eyed them with mild disinterest.

"Now what?" Igarashi hissed under his breath, his gaze downcast.

"Do as I said. Turn at the corner," Kusanagi repeated.

"Right."

His arm still draped over Kusanagi's shoulder, Igarashi turned toward the elementary schoolyard.

The Section 6 agent looked away from them.

Through Igarashi's cyberbrain, Kusanagi could sense his pulse racing.

On the other side of a steel fence, the elementary schoolground was packed with so many tents that there was hardly room to walk. They were all fashioned from old tarps, faded from long years of exposure to the rain.

The better structures were the ones where the tarps had been draped over monkey bars, jungle gyms, and other pre-existing playground structures. Other tents were haphazardly improvised by tying a corner of a tarp to a tree or using a scavenged desk as a ceiling.

The schoolhouse, too, was brimming with people.

"Walk toward the river," Kusanagi instructed Igarashi.

The Zenpuku-ji River ran alongside one corner of the schoolyard.

"Here?" Igarashi asked.

Beyond the wire mesh fence, on the other side of the river, they could see the back of Won Pin's building.

"Yes. Are your men in position?"

"Not quite. Tanaka—the one with the rifle—will need the most

time, don't you think? He has to make his way down from the roof of the building over by the north side of the station and get into position at the other end of the shopping street."

Kusanagi supposed she couldn't expect this group to function like Section 9. She pondered how to make her plan work under these circumstances.

Their weapons included the Sebro M5 she'd liberated from the Section 6 men the night before and the retrofitted Skorpion. Plus one sharpshooter. She couldn't really count the other men.

There were three Section 6 agents—Kusanagi wasn't worried about them. The only potential problem was Baoshi.

Kusanagi had managed to scrape by him back at the bunkhouse, but that .50 caliber was a real menace. If it were mounted to something, she could move into its dead space, but when the whole unit was maneuverable that wasn't an option. She could hide behind an obstacle and wait for it to run out of ammo, but even a concrete wall might not withstand the onslaught if it wasn't sufficiently strong. Heavy machine guns like the .50 caliber had shot through tank armor on battlefields of the past.

<Igarashi. I'm in position.> Tanaka, the sharpshooter, cyber-commed in.

Kusanagi checked his visual field.

It was the view from a rooftop roughly 100 meters from Won Pin's building.

She could see the fourth floor windows, where Won Pin's apartment was located.

<I can even see inside from up here,> Tanaka reported.

"Hear that?" Igarashi said.

"If you aim into the apartment, Baoshi will notice. It's the three men I want you to watch," Kusanagi said.

<You got it.>

The reticle shifted from Won Pin's window to the exit of the shopping street. The agents were standing in the street, but one of them was missing.

<I can only see two of them from where I am.>

They were already on the move.

Kusanagi was sure that the Section 6 men were prepared for a fight.

If the two scouts Kusanagi had downed had sent them information about Baoshi, they would have come with more men.

But there were only three of them. And they were far from heavily armed. Kusanagi figured they were probably high-output cyborgs, but they would be no match for Baoshi.

It would take overwhelming firepower to stop Baoshi. The only other option was to destroy him from the inside.

Right now, Kusanagi's side didn't have that kind of firepower.

An internal assault, then.

But in a place like this, with no infrastructure, she couldn't use the Net to stage her attack.

She would have to get close enough to Baoshi to plug a cyber-brain lock into the port in his neck.

But that was easier said than done.

She would have to catch him off guard.

But Baoshi didn't emerge from Won Pin's apartment.

"What's that son of a bitch up to?" Igarashi lifted his gaze to the top of the building. One of the Section 6 men was walking slowly across the roof.

He zoomed in. The man was carrying a small bomb.

"He's nuts. That thing'll blow old Won Pin to bits!"

"Hey . . ." Kusanagi said to Igarashi.

"What?"

"Can you jump that high?" she asked.

"Huh?"

Kusanagi was pointing to the roof of Won Pin's building.

Igarashi's visual field wavered. "N-no way! Not with a cyber-parts ratio like mine!"

"I see. That leaves me with no choice." Kusanagi laid a hand on Igarashi's shoulder. "Step back from the fence six paces," she directed.

"Like this?" Igarashi did as he was told.

"Now keep your eyes on the fence, please. And tell your sniper, Tanaka, not to take his eyes off of me."

"Uh, okay . . . just what do you intend to do?" Igarashi asked.

"This."

Kusanagi unplugged the cable from Igarashi's neck. The level of static in her visual field increased. Using a wireless connection inevitably degraded the information quality.

"If you jump up there, they'll nab you!" Igarashi protested.

"I'm relying on you fellows to make sure that doesn't happen," Kusanagi replied.

"You're asking too much!" Igarashi called after her, but

Kusanagi had already turned her back.

She ran forward, counting exactly six paces, and sprang. On her way up, she pushed off of the fence, launching herself up into the night sky.

She could see herself through Tanaka's eyes, watching her from a nearby building.

Based on her position in the air, Kusanagi calculated where she would land. She gauged her trajectory to land on the roof of the building in front of Won Pin's before leaping again to his rooftop.

It was like playing a video game and manipulating a character on a monitor. But Kusanagi was using her own body, and if she fell, she would actually get hurt.

She felt the wind against her skin as she adjusted her posture in midair.

Now she was on her way down again.

The rooftop was still two meters away. She stopped spinning and pointed her feet downward, focusing her energy in her toes.

One meter.

Her upper body stabilized.

Her toes touched the roof.

Ankles. Knees. Hips. Torso. She utilized every part of her body.

She felt the roof under the bottom of her feet—her impact-absorbing rubber soles scraping against the slate roofing.

The rooftop responded to her gravity and momentum with

its own counterforce. Kusanagi absorbed that thrust in her own body, compressing herself as tightly as she could and redirecting the energy into her next leap.

Once again, she sprang, shooting into the night sky at the speed of a flying arrow.

Her vision was dark. She could only hear the sound of the air rushing past her ears and feel the wind resistance against her skin.

<You won't reach!>

A cybercomm from Tanaka crackled in Kusanagi's brain, its sound quality poor since it was being relayed through Igarashi. Kusanagi didn't have access to the direct cybercomm circuit his group utilized, so she had to go through Igarashi's cyberbrain. There was nothing she could do about the static. She had to make do with whatever information she could get to compensate for her lack of sight.

She'd jumped too high.

She'd been concentrating too hard on jumping high enough to reach the roof and had miscalculated her trajectory. As a result, her jump was too vertical, with not nearly enough forward momentum.

If she didn't do something, she would smash right into the side of the building.

In that case . . .

Kusanagi executed a half turn, pointing her legs parallel to the ground.

Would she make it?

Her feet touched the wall. She used her ankles and knees to absorb the lateral impact.

The smell of smoldering rubber reached her nostrils. The soles of her shoes skidded against the side of the building and stopped her plummet.

Only a split second had passed.

During that time, Kusanagi used her entire body to leap off the wall as vertically as possible.

Her upward velocity reached zero.

She swung her legs up and shifted her center of gravity. With another half-twist, her heels touched the roof.

But her body couldn't resist the gravity pulling it over backward—would the rooftop meet her back when she fell?

She read Tanaka's vision.

There was no rooftop behind her.

Kusanagi struggled to straighten up, but gravity overcame her.

<You're going to fall!> Igarashi's voice shouted.

I know!

The impact slammed Kusanagi's back. Her titanium skull hit concrete, and her mind filled with static.

Finally, her body was still. She could feel gravity pulling toward her head.

"What happened?"

<You're hanging from your knees over the edge of the roof. But the guy on the roof's spotted you!> Igarashi messaged from below.

Kusanagi borrowed his vision. She could see herself hanging

upside down by the knees from the edge of the building. The Section 6 agent was drawing near.

<Watch out!>

The man was pointing his gun at her.

But just then, the man on the roof went flying.

In a heartbeat, Kusanagi pulled herself up.

Tanaka, the sniper, had fired the shot.

"Was that Tanaka?"

<Yup.>

"Tell him I said thank you."

<You got it.>

But the gunshot also had another effect—a thunderous noise resounded from below Kusanagi's feet.

A roar like a wall crumbling.

"Here we go."

It was the rumble of Baoshi's .50 caliber. Its overture was answered by a crisp volley of high-speed armor-piercing fire—a Section 6 submachine gun.

So much for my plans.

Normally, Kusanagi would have taken care of the Section 6 agent on the roof with ease. Then she would have wrapped things up by creeping up on Baoshi and immobilizing him with a cyberbrain lock.

This was all happening because she couldn't see.

She would just have to do her best with what she had.

Kusanagi began to run. "Take care of the one who's still down there!" she directed.

<Got it.>

Tanaka's view shifted from the rooftop to the base of the building. The Section 6 agent watching the action above was centered in the reticle.

The man's body danced.

Igarashi's visual field was wobbly. He ran out of the schoolyard toward Won Pin's building.

Kusanagi descended from the roof and landed in a crouch on the balcony of Won Pin's apartment, directly below.

An ear-splitting boom and a blast of light emanated from inside.

Kusanagi couldn't see the light, but Tanaka's visual field went blank for an instant.

A flashbomb.

It was a device that used a deafening sound and blinding light to briefly deaden an enemy's senses. Even though its effects lasted only for a moment, a loss of perception during a fight spelled defeat. In a life-or-death struggle, that could only mean death.

"RAAAAAAUGH!" An angry roar and the rumble of the .50 caliber filled the air. The glass over Kusanagi's head shattered and a person tumbled out.

"Ugh!" From his voice, Kusanagi judged it was a Section 6 agent. She listened as the man's body was instantly pulverized by a barrage of 12.7 mm fire from the .50 caliber. Then she sensed a large mass passing just next to her.

<Baoshi's on the balcony!>

Reflexively, Kusanagi launched a tracer toward the sound.

"Did my tracer hit?"

<Yeah, bull's-eye.>

Igarashi raced up the building's stairs and burst into the room just as Baoshi burst through the window and out into the sky. In his right hand, he held the .50 caliber; his left arm cradled Won Pin.

Igarashi saw them, and Kusanagi looked on through Igarashi's eyes.

Igarashi ran to the window and out onto the balcony, keeping Baoshi and Won Pin in his sight—even as Baoshi landed on the pavement below and lumbered off into the night.

Chapter 13



It was like a storm had passed through.

The gunfight had done extensive damage to Won Pin's apartment, from the front entrance to the kitchen.

Kusanagi went over the information from Igarashi's visual field.

One of the Section 6 men had been blown to shreds from the waist up. Only his lower body remained on the floor by the front entryway. Most people probably couldn't stand the sight of it. The man who had remained outside was gone. Perhaps he'd run away or gone after Baoshi. Or perhaps he'd gone to summon reinforcements.

"Either he's following Baoshi or else he's gone for help," Kusanagi said.

Baoshi was a strong combatant, but there was no indication that he knew anything about tracking. For a Section 6 operative, following his trail would probably be a walk in the park.

Kusanagi opened a 3-D map of the Ogikubo Station area in her

cyberbrain. An illuminated marker on the map indicated the tracer she'd fired at Baoshi.

It was showing a point east of here.

The former Suginami Ward Government Offices.

"What's here?" Kusanagi asked, forwarding Igarashi the map information.

"That's the anti-China militants' base."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. That's the Citadel, where the armed vigilantes live."

"The Citadel?"

The ruins of the Suginami Ward Government Offices were known as the Citadel, Igarashi explained as he displayed a diagram in his cyberbrain.

There were three main ward office buildings.

The ten-story West Tower.

The six-story Central Tower.

The seven-story East Tower.

Each of the buildings had two basement floors and an underground parking lot.

Back when the ward government had been up and running, its various departments had operated out of offices in the towers.

Igarashi marked each of the locations on the image in his cyberbrain as he spoke.

"The one you have to watch out for is the ten-story West Tower. The top floor's outfitted with heavy machine guns overlooking the grounds. If you wander too close by accident, they'll make mincemeat of you.

"The south, west, and north walls are each equipped with an

HMG. The top floor is their headquarters. The rest of the floors are occupied by the anti-China faction's toadies."

"A real den of outlaws, huh?"

"Maybe so. If it weren't for them, I might have taken over the place for myself."

"I'm surprised the Kantō riot police tolerate this."

"I'm sure they have some secret arrangement. Besides, it's not like the anti-China faction beats up on the Chinese refugees or anything. They're just opposed to Japan and China making nice. Of course, there are violent extremists among them who carry out attacks like the *SS Hope* incident."

"The fact that they're willing to involve innocent bystanders to achieve their goals qualifies them as a full-fledged terrorist group," Kusanagi said. "Is there a way to get inside?"

"Not through the front. If you try just waltzing in, they'll greet you with their machine guns. There is a way in, but I can't say that I recommend it. Why does this place interest you, anyway?" Igarashi asked.

"I want to talk with Won Pin."

"Won Pin? Oh, so this is where Baoshi brought him? Listen, even my men and I don't mess with this place. I wasn't too thrilled about taking on Baoshi, either. I've lived my life steering clear of outright warfare, and I don't want to die at the hands of the anti-China militants."

"Considering that that's your stance, I appreciate how far you've come with me."

"Well, who knows what sort of trouble you might have cooked up otherwise?"

Kusanagi wasn't very surprised by this turn of events.

What did Won Pin know?

He might have information connected to Roy Tairagi.

That might be why Section 6 was trying so hard to get their hands on him. She was sure that their next attack would be even more audacious.

Kusanagi observed at the mountain of junk heaped in Won Pin's room. The Net terminal Won Pin had given her had come from that pile. That terminal had led Kusanagi to the place where she'd glimpsed Roy Tairagi's photograph.

She remembered thinking that he resembled someone familiar.

Kusanagi opened the picture of Tairagi's face from her Net memory.

Those rugged, determined features.

"Ah!" Something dawned on her.

"Do you recognize this man?"

Kusanagi forwarded Tairagi's face to Igarashi.

"Hmm? Oh . . . isn't this Baoshi? Maybe not, but it looks like him."

"You think so, too?"

Having lost her sight, Kusanagi only had a vague impression of Baoshi's face. For that reason, she'd wanted to check with Igarashi, who knew Baoshi much better.

Now she was sure.

Baoshi was related to Tairagi. Judging from his age, he could be Tairagi's son.

Then who did that make Won Pin—the man Baoshi protected?

Kusanagi knew that he, too, was connected to Tairagi. But beyond that, she would have to ask Won Pin directly.

Kusanagi began to walk.

"Hey, where are you going?" Igarashi asked.

"I'm going to see Won Pin."

"Won Pin? But Baoshi's with him!"

"There's something I want to ask him."

"Still? But you can't even see!"

"I'll manage," Kusanagi said.

"Why is this so important?" Igarashi wanted to know.

"I want to know why Won Pin protects this place. Something tells me that that information will help me learn what the person I'm looking for is trying to accomplish."

"Why do you want to know that?"

"I'll worry about that after I find out," Kusanagi replied, heading toward the door.

She knew that taking on Baoshi and the anti-China vigilantes in her state was a rash move. But until she discovered the truth about Tairagi, she couldn't back down from this battle.

She ran her hand along the wall, looking for the stairwell.

Everything was black.

But even if she had to feel her way with her hands, she had to keep moving forward if she wanted to change anything.

Tairagi's virus had robbed an innocent girl of her memory and transformed her into a vicious, bloodthirsty vampire.

Why had Tairagi dredged up his slumbering past—a past full of the nightmares of war?

Kusanagi's toes detected the edge of the floor. She was at the stairs.

Just when she was about to step down, a hand grabbed her forearm.

"As if I could let a blind lady go all alone." It was Igarashi's voice.

"I knew you'd come around," Kusanagi said.

"What? So you're counting on me, now?"

"Yes. I'm counting on you."

Igarashi plugged a cable into the port in Kusanagi's neck. Light returned to Kusanagi's visual field.

"Thanks. Now, you said there was a way to get into that base."

"Yeah. Like I said, I can't recommend it."

"Fine with me. Just hold on tight."

"Huh?"

"We don't have much time. I'm jumping us down."

Kusanagi leapt over the railing, down to the asphalt four stories below.

Chapter 14



Once, a subway system had run underneath the Oumekai Road. It had been called the Maru-no-uchi Line, and had arched from Ogikubo to Ikebukuro, passing through Shinjuku on the way.

But after the tectonic change in which Shinjuku and everything eastward had sunk into the ocean, parts of the tunnels had collapsed, rendering the subway system unusable.

Kusanagi and Igarashi sloshed through the blackness of the defunct tunnels.

When Igarashi had mentioned a route to the Suginami Ward Buildings, he had been referring to the Maru-no-uchi subway passages.

The Ward Buildings, now the impregnable fortress of the anti-China militants, were located on Oumekai Road. But it would have been impossible for Kusanagi and Igarashi to approach the building openly without help. The ruined subway system was their only chance.

While there was no danger of attack here, that didn't mean that the route was safe.

Everything was pitch black.

The passage was flooded with knee-high water.

With her own eyesight gone, Kusanagi had to depend completely on Igarashi's eyes. The light he held shone on the walls. The cement columns that held up the sides of the tunnel were damaged in places, and there was no telling when the roof might cave in on them.

"Walking above-ground from Ogikubo, it never seemed this far," Igarashi said. "But down here in the dark, it feels like we're walking and walking and we're still not there."

"But we are making steady headway," Kusanagi said.

"I know, but . . ." Igarashi fell silent.

The only sound was the sloshing of their footsteps through the water.

Then Igarashi's light was swallowed up by the blackness, and they couldn't see what lay ahead.

From Ogikubo station, it was one kilometer to the old Suginami Ward Buildings. As they walked, Kusanagi counted her paces. They would reach the station soon.

A ledge hove into the glow of their light.

"The platform," Igarashi said softly.

With her hand to the wall, Kusanagi continued to advance through the darkness. Her paces remained the same.

After a short distance, her hand came to a ledge at roughly chest height.

"Wait!" Igarashi cautioned.

Through Igarashi's sight, Kusanagi could make out a faint light up ahead. There was a flight of steps beyond what appeared to be a ticket gate. The brightness seeped in from above.

The light wavered.

Klomp.

The sound of footsteps descended the staircase.

Kusanagi hid underneath the platform. Igarashi, too, extinguished his light and ducked into the safety hollow next to the tracks.

The single set of footsteps descended the stairs and approached the platform.

A powerful beam of light glanced just past where Kusanagi was crouched.

It was an anti-China vigilante on patrol. His hair was shorn into a fierce-looking mohawk.

Igarashi reached for the Skorpion at his chest, but Kusanagi's hand stilled him.

The man's footsteps passed directly overhead, then turned and walked away in the direction he'd come.

Silently, Igarashi poked his head out from underneath the platform.

At the same instant, Kusanagi overtook the fleeing Mohawked man and stabbed a cable into the port in his neck.

"Ugh!" For a brief moment, his body went rigid. Then it crumpled limply to the ground.

Kusanagi looked down at the vigilante.

"... He's got most of the information I need. Baoshi's with Won Pin on the tenth floor of the West Tower." She extracted the information from Mohawk's cyberbrain. "Also, security's going to be a lot tighter up there. Since Baoshi showed up here with Won Pin, they're on the alert for his attackers."

"I see," Igarashi said.

Suddenly, a man on the platform moved, and Igarashi leapt into a fighting posture.

"It's okay," Kusanagi reassured him calmly. "This man's going to serve as my eyes and hands."

"... What have you done?" Igarashi demanded.

Mohawk Man rose languidly to his feet. He smiled crookedly and spoke in a deep voice. "He's just sleeping. But I've taken command of his entire body." Slowly, he disconnected the cable connecting him to Kusanagi. "I'm going to go have a look upstairs. Keep an eye on my body, will you?"

"Wha—?!" Kusanagi's body began to tip over, and Igarashi hurried to catch it. "Keep an eye on your body? I may bail, you know?"

"If you were capable of that, you'd have done it by now. Take good care of that, now!"

"Take good care of my body'—gimme a break!"

In the hijacked body of the mohawked vigilante, Kusanagi climbed the stairs out of the subway station.

Taking complete remote control of this man meant that her own body was left vulnerable, but she knew Igarashi would stash

it in a safe place.

Outside, the sky was beginning to get light.

Kusanagi looked up at the ten-story West Tower. One of the windows was open with a heavy machine gun mounted to it.

She extracted the information she needed from Mohawk Man's cyberbrain.

At present, there were forty-two anti-China vigilantes in the ruined ward office buildings. Twelve were currently on security duty. Only Mohawk here had been patrolling this area.

"Better start with the Net."

Mohawk Man entered the ward building.

The front doors of the central building led into an entrance hall. It had electric lights. Evidently these buildings had electricity, but Kusanagi doubted it was obtained legally.

A sign that read "West Tower" was hung above the entrance to a spacious lounge.

Kusanagi peered inside. There were surveillance cameras everywhere.

Those should come in handy.

She used Mohawk's body to look for the security office.

At the end of a hallway on B1.

Kusanagi made her way down the dimly lit hallway; the weak electrical supply barely powered the fluorescent lighting.

The plate on the door read "Security."

Mohawk opened the door.

A bearded man sat alone in front of a wall of monitors.

"Yes?"

"Nobody in the subway."

"Good. If Baoshi hadn't lugged old man Won Pin out here we wouldn't have to bother with all this tedious crap."

"Yeah. Speaking of which, why do we care so much what happens to that old fart?"

Kusanagi hadn't found the answer to that question in Mohawk's brain. Most likely, he simply didn't know either.

"You haven't been here long, have you? Truth is, that 'old fart' basically commands our operations."

"No shit?"

"Yeah. He pretends he's not involved, but we do exactly as he says. Of course, lately the organization's grown so much that his command doesn't reach all of the extremities."

"Yeah?"

"The cell we had stationed out in Niihama didn't keep a low enough profile and Public Safety rubbed 'em out. But even if the authorities hadn't gotten to them, they probably would have been amputated," the bearded man said. "Anyway, it's about time you got back to your post."

"Yeah. Just one more thing."

"What is it?"

Mohawk blasted a hole through the bearded man's forehead with his submachine gun.

Disbelief. That was the look on the man's face as he slumped over.

"Sorry about that," Mohawk said, pushing the bearded man out of the chair and sitting down.

Kusanagi extracted a cable from Mohawk Man's neck and connected it to the security terminal. Images from the compound's security cameras flooded into her brain. She located Won Pin and Baoshi in the footage from the three cameras in the room at the top of the West Tower.

Won Pin was lying down in the middle of the room. Baoshi stood at his side with the .50 caliber, looking like a guardian deity at a temple gate. At each window, gunmen kept a watch on the outside from behind heavy machine guns.

How to disarm them . . .

Just then, one of the gunmen leapt to attention.

What was happening?

Kusanagi viewed all of the surveillance images at once.

Who . . . ?

Through the cameras on the roof, Kusanagi saw two Tiltorotors appear in the dawn sky and fly overhead.

"Kantō Riot Police"—the words were emblazoned on the side of the Tiltorotors.

Section 6!

The operative that had escaped from Won Pin's apartment had followed Baoshi here and called in for backup from the special assault forces of the Kantō District Riot Police.

Fantastic—just what I didn't need.

One of the units began to descend toward the ward office compound.

In the tower where Won Pin was, a gunman took aim and squeezed the trigger of his HMG. A sound like a hammer striking

steel echoed through the air. The Tiltro had taken a direct hit.

But at the same moment, the Tiltro's hatch opened and the riot police inside unleashed a barrage of fire at the tower windows as their craft hovered outside.

Their bullets filled the air of the tower room.

In a flash, Baoshi grabbed Won Pin and dove for cover. But the gunmen were too slow. The onslaught perforated them like honeycombs.

From his sheltered position, Baoshi fired at the Tiltro with his .50 caliber. With the force of an anti-materiel rifle, the bullets assailed the side of the Tiltro, wiping out several of its occupants. Their body armor didn't stand a chance.

The Tiltro rose back up into the sky.

The other craft had descended to the ground, and its occupants streamed out of it and into the towers. Their movements were well-coordinated; obviously they were highly trained.

If Kusanagi didn't intervene, Section 6 would surely capture Won Pin.

She heard a stampede of footsteps behind her.

The mohawked man in the security room was probably a gonner. Kusanagi cut off her remote control.

"We have to get out of here."

Kusanagi's lifeless form sat up suddenly, startling Igarashi.

"Shit! You scared the hell out of me!"

"We've got company." Kusanagi laid a hand on Igarashi's shoulder. "To the stairs. We can still make it in time."

"In time for what?"

"Just go!"

At Kusanagi's urging, Igarashi began to run.

Kusanagi could hear the blades of the Tiltos.

"What the hell is that?" Igarashi shouted.

"Riot police!" Kusanagi shouted back.

The Tiltos couldn't see the stairs to the subway station from where they were, but it wouldn't be long before the riot squad sealed off the exit.

The gunshots they could hear were probably fired by anti-China fighters.

Kusanagi picked up images from the security cameras to monitor the movements of the anti-China fighters and riot police, identifying the safest route.

"Where are we going?" Igarashi asked.

"They're headed for the West Tower. For now, we just need to get to the top."

"Hey, can you see now?"

"The security cameras are my eyes."

Kusanagi moved in front of Igarashi. As she ran, she could feel the pressure of someone trying to interfere with the camera control programming. The riot police who had stormed the security office were trying to take over the surveillance system. Kusanagi used the Net to set up a barrier.

She used a maze barrier. Given the hacking abilities of the riot police, that would hold them for a while.

Kusanagi and Igarashi reached the East Tower. Just as she'd

expected—the building still hadn't been taken over. The anti-China fighters were concentrating their forces in the West and Central Towers.

"The elevators aren't working!" Igarashi yelled.

"We couldn't use them anyway—they'd seal us up inside. Take the stairs!"

"The *stairs*?!"

"And if you don't want to die, I suggest you run," Kusanagi added.

"I should never have gone along with this!" Igarashi lamented. But he continued to run behind Kusanagi.

Kusanagi started up the stairs. As she ran, she checked the footage from the surveillance cameras. The riot police still hadn't reached the top floor of the West Tower. The anti-China militants lying in wait on the way up were holding the intruders off, focusing their energies on impeding the riot police invading from below.

What was the other Tiltorotor up to?

Kusanagi manipulated the rooftop cameras, scanning for the Tilto that had been hovering above the Central Tower.

It was in a position out of range of the HMGs.

"Looks like they're going to take over the roof of the Central Tower, too," Kusanagi said.

"What are we going to do?!" Igarashi demanded.

"Good question," Kusanagi said.

Just then, they heard noises overhead.

The surveillance camera installed in the landing they were

approaching showed an anti-China fighter poised for battle.

Kusanagi gave Igarashi a shove.

A crisp spray of sub-machine gun fire skimmed just under Kusanagi's feet. Instinctively, she had leaped into the air.

Igarashi, too, evaded the attack by a hair.

On her way down, Kusanagi brought her heels down on the head of the militant who had fired at them. A good stomping by a full-cyborg was always enough to shatter an enemy's skull.

Now they were almost at the rooftop of the East Tower, but the riot squad was in the process of occupying the roof of the Central Tower.

An explosion shook the building.

"Those maniacs!" Igarashi exclaimed.

The militants had detonated a bomb. They were struggling desperately to protect their last stronghold from the riot squad.

Kusanagi would have to overcome both the anti-China militants and the riot police Section 6 was commanding. Her only ally was Igarashi. The odds were overwhelmingly against them.

Igarashi seemed to pick up on her thoughts.

"Maybe we should retreat after all," he suggested.

"If I intended to back down, I wouldn't have come in the first place," Kusanagi said. "Besides, the riot police are already occupying the bottom of the building. There's no escape route—we have to keep going. Now, let's move!" She started up the stairs again.

They were almost at the top.

Kusanagi manipulated the security cameras on the roof of

the East Tower and saw the Tiltorotor rise up into the air. It was retreating temporarily to avoid the HMG fire.

Again, Kusanagi rotated the security cameras, checking the roof of the Center Tower.

The riot police were scaling the walls of the West Tower to infiltrate the building's top floor from the outside. Several officers were also standing by on the roof of the West Tower. They were probably planning to invade from both above and below.

Kusanagi reached the landing that led out onto the rooftop of the East Tower.

The riot police had finished developing their positions and were now only waiting for the right moment to attack.

Kusanagi could see from the security cameras inside the ward buildings that the anti-China fighters were losing the battle. A few scattered pockets of resistance remained, but for the most part the riot police had overwhelmed and disarmed the fighters.

The final battle would play out between the riot squad and Baoshi and the anti-China fighters on the top floor of the East Tower.

On the roof of the West Tower, riot police with liquid wire tanks strapped to their backs raised their hands toward the Central Tower.

A group of officers would invade from the western wall and draw the enemy's attention. This would allow more officers to invade from the eastern side of the West Tower from the roof of the Central Tower, overpowering the defense. If Baoshi and Won Pin tried to flee from the room on the top floor, the riot police

from the Central Tower would be waiting for them on the next floor down. When it came down to close combat, the battle would be won.

"You're just watching?" Igarashi began to get anxious.

"If they were just dealing with regular armed fighters, their strategy might actually work . . ." Kusanagi said.

The invasion began.

Kusanagi watched the footage from the cameras on the top floor.

The Tiltorotor that had retreated earlier now descended toward the northern wall, blasting a sideways deluge of bullets at the room.

The anti-China fighters inside returned fire with their heavy machine guns.

That was when it happened.

Something flew into the tower from the west side of the building and clanked against the floor.

For a moment, all of the anti-China fighters looked at it.

Then a white light enveloped the room. The assault forces had thrown a flash bomb in through a broken west window.

A stream of riot police rappelled into the room on their liquid wires. They overturned tables and other furniture to create makeshift barriers as they sprayed the anti-China fighters with gunfire, herding the fighters from west to east until they were all clumped against the eastern wall.

Then the brigade from the roof of the Central Tower began their invasion from the east—behind the anti-China

fighters' backs. In their confusion, the militants were quickly suppressed.

The invasion had taken a mere twenty seconds.

One minute later.

The gunshots had died down.

The anti-China fighters who had been defending the top floor lay face down in the middle of the room, their hands secured behind their backs. Despite the fact that they'd been armed, these men were amateurs, after all. There might have been a few war veterans among them, but most of them had never experienced actual combat before.

So it was over.

Had Won Pin survived?

If Won Pin was still alive, there was still hope.

Kusanagi rotated the security cameras.

Won Pin wasn't among the anti-China fighters on the floor.

In fact, Baoshi wasn't among them, either.

"Baoshi's gone . . ." she said.

"What?" Igarashi asked.

Kusanagi switched from camera to camera, searching the room. There were no blind spots. And the riot police had searched under and behind all of the furniture.

Where were they?

The corners of the room.

Underneath the tables.

Outside the windows.

Behind the door.

Kusanagi scanned with each of the cameras.

But Baoshi and Won Pin were nowhere to be seen.

There!

Just as the realization dawned on Kusanagi, the massacre began.

One of the officers contorted into an unnatural shape and shot into the air as if struck by a giant hammer. His lifeless body crashed to the floor.

Kusanagi turned her attention to the elevator. Its doors were open just a crack, allowing the barrel of Baoshi's .50 caliber to peek through.

Its savage bullets raged against the riot police. Even with their specialized impact-absorbing body armor, they didn't stand a chance. The units' numbers dwindled as the .50 caliber mowed down officer after officer.

The gunfire didn't spare the anti-China fighters on the floor. It blew them to pieces, sending chunks of flesh flying through the air.

The surviving riot police returned Baoshi's fire but the steel doors of the elevator proved an excellent bulwark.

Robbed of their superior numbers, the riot police's advantage melted away.

Now Baoshi showed himself, pushing the elevator doors open with his .50 caliber. He was clinging to the cable that suspended the elevator with one hand and grasping his weapon in the other.

With a fleetness that belied his hulking stature, Baoshi sprang

forth from the elevator shaft, wielding the .50 caliber with ease as he blasted the riot police scrambling to position themselves on both sides.

He was the very image of a demon god.

The contents of the room quickly turned to rubble.

Won Pin was lashed to Baoshi's back. If Section 6 wanted to take him alive, they wouldn't dare attack Baoshi like this.

There was nothing they could do.

The riot police took to their heels.

Unhurriedly, Baoshi pursued them.

The details of the situation had yet to reach the officers on the roof of the Central Tower, and a wave of confusion swept through them as they received word that the assault forces that had held the upper hand were now fleeing the scene.

Before they knew what had hit them, Baoshi came flying out the window of the West Tower.

A devastating onslaught wracked the confused unit.

Baoshi's .50 caliber. If Kusanagi could disarm him, there was still a chance. But how?

The roar stopped.

The ten-plus officers deployed on the Central Tower's roof had been annihilated by the solitary attacker.

Slowly, Baoshi surveyed his surroundings, then leapt back into the Central Tower.

"Let's go," Kusanagi directed.

"You want to take on *that*?" Igarashi squawked.

"If it's just Baoshi, we still stand a chance," Kusanagi said.

"You saw him singlehandedly take out that entire riot squad!" Igarashi protested.

"That was their fault," Kusanagi said. "Their strategy was unsuited to their opponent."

Kusanagi leapt down onto the roof of the Central Tower.

Igarashi followed.


As she ran across the roof of the Central Tower toward the West Tower, Kusanagi gathered equipment from several of the fallen officers.

"What are you planning?" Igarashi asked.

"I have a favor to ask you."

"A favor?"

Chapter 15



On the top story of the West Tower, the corpses of the riot police assault team and anti-China fighters lay peacefully intermingled on the floor.

Baoshi didn't give a shit about them.

He was willing to act as a human shield for Won Pin.

Won Pin's protection was Baoshi's entire purpose in life.

When he was little, his mother had told him, "Grow up to be a man who can protect your father."

Baoshi was determined to carry out that duty.

His mother had died the day Tokyo was destroyed.

Baoshi had survived because he'd been with his father.

Paralyzed by the fear that the one woman he loved might betray him, his father had avoided coming home, immersing himself always in his research.

Then, one day, because of his research's success, his father's colleagues had betrayed him.

That was when Baoshi's father had decided to go home to Baoshi's mother.

Baoshi had always looked up to his father.

He would never forget how devastated his father had been when he'd learned of Baoshi's mother's death.

That was the day the two of them had begun their nomadic lives together.

They'd given up everything.

Their country.

Their names.

Their lives.

Even their bodies.

Klomp.

Baoshi's reflections were interrupted by the noise on the stairway to the floor below.

"Someone's coming," he grunted.

"You're going to kill them, too?" Won Pin said. He was reclining on the floor where Baoshi had set him down after unstrapping his father from his back. "... it's probably that woman."

Baoshi didn't answer. He continued to grip his .50 caliber tightly. He'd replaced its burnt-out barrel and reloaded.

Baoshi had sensed that Kusanagi was a formidable opponent, and he was eager to fight her without any distractions in the way. He'd always devoted himself completely to his father's protection—this would be his one indulgence.

"You're a glutton for punishment, aren't you? I'd like to see this," Won Pin said. He got up and hid under a desk over

by the wall.

The sounds from below grew closer.

Baoshi pointed the .50 caliber toward the stairwell door.

While he was focusing on the door, a black shadow sprang into the room from a window on the opposite wall.

Chapter 16



Baoshi's back was to Kusanagi.

He turned to face her. Immediately, the barrel of his .50 caliber was staring at her as well.

His reactions were even faster than she had anticipated.

Kusanagi changed direction.

A gust of wind.

A blast of .50 caliber gunfire pierced the air where she had just been.

Shaving the concrete, the onslaught followed her. Its thunderous roar bore down on her, leaving destruction in its wake.

Kusanagi ran like lightning.

As she ran, she threw something in Baoshi's direction.

Without hesitation, Baoshi blasted it with his .50 caliber.

The missile shattered. The liquid within exploded into a fine mist and instantly began to harden.

“!”

Baoshi had blasted a portable tank of liquid wire.

It was the same technology the Tachikomas used to create portable cables by releasing a substance that hardened immediately when it came into contact with the air. Kusanagi had scavenged several of the devices, used by the attack squad for rappelling, and had strapped them to her body and brought them with her.

The cloud of liquid wire became a net, threatening to entangle Baoshi.

Baoshi ducked to avoid it. During that opening, Kusanagi seized the opportunity to shoot another liquid wire at him.

The solution adhered to the .50 caliber and began to harden. Kusanagi fastened the other end of the cable around the frame of the shattered window.

His gun immobilized, Kusanagi closed in on Baoshi.

Baoshi tugged at the gun, straining the liquid wire that held it to the utter limit of its strength.

Impossible!

Baoshi gave the gun a ferocious twist.

The hardened liquid cable snapped with a keen ringing sound. Immediately, Baoshi pointed the barrel of his liberated weapon at the advancing Kusanagi.

"Yi—!"

Without hesitation, Kusanagi dove into a roll.

An earsplitting roar passed overhead.

It was the sound of the 40 kg gun piercing the air.

Next, on legs like tree trunks, Baoshi's feet descended toward

Kusanagi's head.

A dull thud shook the room.

Kusanagi had twisted her head, dodging the blow.

The concrete floor was cracked and indented where Baoshi's feet hit. His murderous eyes glared down at Kusanagi.

Kusanagi smiled back at him.

It wasn't intentional.

Her eyes still couldn't see. She was controlling her own position and movements based on the objective view of herself afforded by the security cameras installed throughout the room.

She was hardly at her best.

But to compensate, she was using an approach that was different from how she normally fought. She was anticipating her opponent's movements based on the situation.

It was just like playing the endgame in a game of Japanese chess.

She read Baoshi's moves.

She evaded his attacks, then made her moves.

But even with Kusanagi's exceptional foresight, the fact remained that Baoshi's physical specs exceeded all normal ranges. Through brute force, Baoshi might outstrip Kusanagi's powers of prediction at any moment.

Kusanagi had only one goal: to jam a cyberbrain lock into the port at the back of Baoshi's neck. His body was highly trained, but his cyberbrain wasn't. If Kusanagi could conquer his brain, the battle would be won.

Baoshi swung the .50 caliber overhead in his right hand. He

seemed to have realized that its bullets weren't enough to stop Kusanagi. Now he was changing tack, seeing what kind of damage he could inflict by using it as a club.

He would do anything to win.

Both opponents vied to use the most effective methods possible to gain the upper hand. For Kusanagi, that meant using a cyberbrain lock. For Baoshi, it was hand-to-hand combat. The internal assault versus the external assault.

With furious speed, Baoshi swung the barrel of the .50 caliber down at Kusanagi.

She couldn't get out of the way!

Just then, a grenade detonating diverted Baoshi's attack.

The .50 caliber slammed into the floor, missing Kusanagi by a hair.

Kusanagi rolled to safety.

Where had the grenade come from?

<Ma-jor!>

It was the voice of a Tachikoma!

<We came as quickly as we could!> another voice sang.

The two Tachikomas barreled into the room through the window, clattering loudly to the floor.

A roar of .50 caliber fire bathed the AI tanks.

"Your armor won't take much of that!" Kusanagi shouted.

<AI-YI-YI-YIIIII!>

Baoshi had recovered his stance.

Under the force of the barrage, the Tachikomas ducked back out of the room.

A bullet whizzed toward Baoshi from a new angle.

With incredible speed, Baoshi ducked, dodging the shot.

"What the hell? The bastard dodged it!"

Kusanagi heard a familiar voice outside the window.

"Batou?"

"Major, your eyes . . . ?"

"I've got plenty of surrogate eyes." Kusanagi pointed to the security cameras.

"For crying out . . . as usual, trying to get yourself killed, I see! Who the hell is this?"

Batou climbed in through the window, holding Baoshi off with his gun.

"Just what he looks like. He's the big boss around here."

"The big boss?"

The .50 caliber's spew sliced the air, and a stream of bullets chased Kusanagi and Batou across the room, boring into the concrete behind them.

They took refuge behind a thick concrete pillar.

"Whoa," Batou said.

"Watch out. He's as strong as you and as agile as I am."

"Sounds unbeatable."

"He isn't."

"Oh?"

Bit by bit, the pillar was crumbling away.

"You hold him off," Kusanagi instructed.

"What are you going to pull?!"

"The only thing I can—get out of that thing's range while he's busy firing it."

"Close combat?"

"Help me get close to him."

"Got it."

With perfect coordination, Kusanagi and Batou leapt out into the open.

The .50 caliber's fire followed Kusanagi.

"Hey! Over here!" Batou squeezed the trigger of his Sebro 26.

The high-speed armor-piercing bullets bore into Baoshi's body, but showed no signs of penetrating it.

"Crap! It's like I'm shooting rubber bands at him!"

Now the .50 caliber was pointed at Batou.

"Shit!" He dove to the floor.

The bullets tore the floor to shreds in the spot where Batou had just been.

Batou watched Kusanagi out of the corner of his eye.

In a low crouch, she was approaching Baoshi from the side.

Baoshi noticed her.

"Major! Watch out!"

The gun swung in a large arc.

But without slackening her pace, Kusanagi continued to charge straight at Baoshi.

A gust of wind whooshed over Kusanagi's head.

But the .50 caliber never came crashing down to the concrete floor, crushing Kusanagi.

The 40 kg weight of the .50 caliber coupled with Baoshi's strength had to carry a downward force of several tons. Nobody would have anticipated that she would block the blow.

But Kusanagi's arms brought the weapon to a stop.

It took tremendous skill to wield one's cyberbody to the ultimate extent of its potential. But Kusanagi had that ability.

There was a reason she was known as a virtuoso cyberbrain operator.

If her timing had been off by a fraction of a second, Baoshi's savage blow would have shattered her skull.

Baoshi swung the gun overhead again.

Kusanagi clung to the weapon and used the upward momentum to launch herself up into the air.

From Baoshi's point of view, it must have seemed as if she'd disappeared into thin air.

That clinched it.

Kusanagi twisted her body to land behind Baoshi.

Baoshi turned, bringing an elbow straight toward Kusanagi's head.

But Kusanagi saw it coming.

She ducked, evading the blow, and thrust the cyberbrain lock into Baoshi's neck.

The signals emitted by the device shut down Baoshi's cyberbody instantaneously.

His body stiffened. Kusanagi thumped him on the shoulder.

"Game over."

Baoshi could hear her, but he was unable to respond.

With a resounding thud, his body hit the floor.

"Talk about a handful!" Batou said, looking down at Baoshi.

<Tell me about it!> Out of nowhere, the Tachikomas had rejoined them, and now stood nodding their agreement, their arms folded.

"You guys were no help at all! Keep it up and you'll be shipped back to the lab!"

<Phooey!>

"Right, Major . . . Major?"

But Kusanagi had walked off toward a corner of the room.

A sudden burst of hearty applause had erupted from that direction.

Without turning her head, Kusanagi could see who it was through the security cameras.

"Bravo! Bravo!" Won Pin congratulated them.

"Who's the geezer?" Batou eyed Won Pin warily.

Igarashi sat next to Won Pin. Kusanagi had directed him to carry Won Pin to a safe location while she battled Baoshi.

She'd been sure that Igarashi could do that.

Next to Igarashi, Won Pin's wrinkled face was drawn into a grin.

"Never thought I'd live to see Baoshi lose a fight! How would you like to be my new bodyguard, dear?"

"Sorry, but I'll pass."

"Why?"

"You did this to wipe out both the Section 6 operatives who were on your trail and the anti-China fighters, who were threatening to derail your intricate plans."

"Well, I'll be damned. You got me," Won Pin exclaimed.

"But there was one little thing that didn't go as planned, wasn't there?"

"What's that, missy?"

"You intended to die with them, Won Pin."

"What makes you say that?" the old man asked.

"I asked Igarashi to escort you out of the room. But you're still here because you wanted to stay— isn't that right?"

Igarashi raised his head. "Yeah. I'm telling you, he's one stubborn old goat. It'd take a bulldozer to move him."

Kusanagi looked down at him coldly.

"Or rather, you had no intention of moving him," she accused.

"W-what do you mean?" Igarashi stammered.

"If Won Pin had died in here, nobody would continue to hunt down Roy Tairagi. Only 'Igarashi' would remain."

Neither Won Pin nor Igarashi responded. They seemed to be waiting to hear what Kusanagi would say next.

"You were the same person all along, weren't you?" Kusanagi looked at the two men.

"When did you figure that out?" Won Pin asked.

"When Igarashi and I were on the move, even though the riot police were invading, you never moved a muscle. In fact, you *couldn't* move."

"What if I told you my back went out?" Won Pin offered.

"I don't have time for jokes. Also, when either of you spoke about that shop on Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street, you got the same look in your eyes. It wasn't just nostalgia—it was regret."

"How could you tell?"

"Woman's intuition."

"Now you're scaring me."

"Let's bring the theatrics to an end. This old man's cyberbody has nothing inside but a snow-white cyberbrain, anyway. Isn't that right, Mr. Roy Tairagi?"

"I guess the jig is up." Igarashi shrugged.

Kusanagi glared at Igarashi—no, at Roy Tairagi.

"Roy Tairagi, the double agent the government couldn't track down. Each time you escaped, you changed cyberbodies. You even swapped lives and memories. But you never could leave behind your past, could you? That memory box in your apartment. It was full of your memories, wasn't it?"

"Exactly. They're all my memories—including the memories of being a man called Roy Tairagi. In China, sometimes I went by Won Pin."

"And here, you acquired the persona of Igarashi."

"Yes."

"I'll have to ask you to come with me. There's a lot I need to know to get to the bottom of all this."

"To get to the bottom of all this . . . If anyone had ever really wanted to know the truth before, I would have been willing to tell them."

"I don't doubt it."

"But they didn't want my story; they wanted what I knew. And who are you? I could tell you were major league, but you didn't seem to be from the police or the military. If you were military, you would have killed me on sight."

"Public Safety Section 9. An assault team under the direct jurisdiction of the Prime Minister."

"Public Safety Section 9. I'll remember that."

Tairagi stood up.

He turned toward Won Pin's cyberbody, raised his Skorpion, and squeezed the trigger.

Won Pin's body danced.

When the gun was quiet, Tairagi tossed it aside. Then he approached Baoshi's stiffened form.

"You heard the lady, Baoshi. From now on, you're free. You're no longer saddled with the curse of being born Roy Tairagi's son."

A voiceless sound escaped Baoshi's lips.

What had he said? Igarashi/Tairagi seemed to hear.

Tears streamed out of Baoshi's eyes.

"Even devils weep. Take care of yourself, my son."


Tairagi patted Baoshi's shoulder and then turned back toward Kusanagi. "I just have one last favor I'd like to ask."

"A favor?"

"I won't try to escape again. But there's something I need to do before I leave this place."

Kusanagi hesitated, then nodded. "Fine."

Chapter 17



The snowflakes were just beginning to blanket the city in white.

At the schoolyard just beyond Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street, the early morning air carried the smell of the chow line. Refugees and laborers waited in line for a bowl of vegetable and rice porridge served by the refugee aide volunteers. Every morning, the same spectacle could be seen in parks throughout Japan's Refugee Residential Zones.

Kusanagi and Tairagi stood at the foot of a tree in a corner of the schoolyard. Tairagi knelt by the tree's roots and began to dig intently in the snowy ground.

"I did it all for vengeance," he told Kusanagi as he labored.

"For vengeance? Is that why you used the anti-China fighters, too?"

"Yes. I wanted the current data they had on Kashimura and Itakura, since they'd targeted them directly on the *SS Hope*. But their information on Itakura's daughter turned out to be bogus."

"So that was how Mikisaka got wrapped up in this . . . but was it really necessary to purge their headquarters?"

"When they found out about the effects of the Vampire Virus, they got carried away. They even sent threat letters to Kashimura and Itakura, for crying out loud!"

"So you used the man in the baseball cap wipe them out."

"Yes. That man was willing to sell his own past for a price, so he was a convenient tool."

"But why did you resort to such convoluted tactics?"

"Which do you suppose is greater, the pain of losing someone you love, or the pain of their betrayal?"

" . . . I've never thought about it."

"I suppose you haven't. I've spent years—no, decades—thinking about it. About what happened. When I created the virus, they mocked it, calling it the Vampire Virus, Tairagi's great masterpiece. But we knew nothing. We never understood the pain that its victims suffered."

"Do you understand now?"

"I don't know about that. But I know how it feels to lose someone you love. I wanted them to feel it, too. I wanted to destroy their blissful ignorance."

"So that's why you hid that memory in the micromachines."

"Yes. This town is everything to me. This is where I am. When they saw it, they would know that I was the one who engineered their demise."

"But why here?" Kusanagi asked.

Tairagi stopped digging momentarily.

"I was born and raised here. And this is where I knew happiness."

He resumed his work.

Kusanagi remained silent, listening to what Tairagi had to say.

"I had a small home, even a child. That was when the military summoned me to do cyberbrain research. It was Kashimura and Itakura that came to my door. There, I engineered micromachines that could control peoples' emotions."

"But why?"

"I was scared."

"Scared?"

"I was afraid of the wife who awaited my return. What would I do if her feelings for me changed? If she betrayed me, would I still be able to smile? Even if I despised her, would I still be able to love her? I pursued my research of human emotion like a desperate man. That was how I discovered the line between love and hatred."

"But your discovery was abused."

"Yes . . ."

"Why did you continue your work anyway?"

Tairagi continued to turn up earth, his pace never slacking. "They held my son hostage. I had no choice but to immerse myself in my research. I poured all of my energies into my work, until it was finally complete. But just when I should have been released, Itakura and Kashimura tricked me again. They sold me out. And while I was wrapped up in that bullshit, Tokyo—and my beloved wife—were blown off the face of the earth . . . Aha! Here it is!"

Tairagi's hand touched metal. He brushed the dirt away and lifted up a metal cube, thirty centimeters long on each side.

He handed the box to Kusanagi.

Tairagi pressed a button on the box, releasing its clasp to reveal a cyberbrain-type memory box, connected to pseudo-bio signals. The memory box was equipped with server capabilities.

"Whose cyberbrain is this?" Kusanagi asked.

"It's my wife's."

"Your wife?" The image of the sweet-looking woman Kusanagi had seen on the Net popped up in the back of Kusanagi's cyberbrain.

"When I finally evaded Itakura and Kashimura and made it back to Ogikubo, my wife's body was beyond rescue. She'd developed acute leukemia from the tremendous levels of radiation, and I found her hooked up to a tangle of tubes and wires, unable to see or hear, or even to speak. All I could do was hold her hand."

"So you extracted her memory and saved it in this box?"

"Yes."

"But it's not alive."

"That's right. This box simply contains her memory. Just a brain, capable of endlessly recalling one particular moment, one particular time. It's only a memory; incapable of responding when I speak to it. Still, I was willing to do anything to keep that alive. I wanted to protect it, I suppose. To protect this little world . . ."

"Little world? You mean, that Net?"

Tairagi looked at Kusanagi.

"That whole Net you saw *was* this cyberbrain. I've always been very particular about this town, for the sole purpose of protecting this memory."

"Did you try connecting to it?"

Silently, Tairagi shook his head.

"I swore I wouldn't until I'd gotten revenge."

Tairagi gave a big stretch.

"Why did you decide to seek revenge after all these years?" Kusanagi asked.

"Because I don't have much time left."

"You don't?"

Tairagi knocked on his own head. "Cyberbrain Sclerosis. When I knew I wasn't going to make it, I decided to do what I had to do, and then to rest my bones here in Tokyo with my wife."

"I see . . ."

Tairagi raised his eyes to look into the blue of the eastern sky.

"Ms. Kusanagi . . . Will you do something for me?"

"What's that?"

"When I've told you everything you need to know, would you completely erase my brain of the fundamental design for those micromachines—before someone else can abuse them?"

"But that would kill you."

Tairagi looked down at the cyberbrain in his hands.

"I died a long time ago. I'm the little cat inside this box."

Tenderly, he stroked the cyberbrain he was cradling.

It seemed to Kusanagi that the brain vibrated ever so slightly, as if responding to his touch.

Snow covered the city, turning it white.

Blanketing everything.

Chapter 18



Kusanagi's eyes could see again.

Right now, they were focused on Daisuke Aramaki.

"Well done on your undercover solo assignment," he told her.

"I didn't do anything. It was all just Roy Tairagi, engineering his own demise."

"Perhaps so." Aramaki withdrew a sheaf of documents from a drawer and spread them out on his desk. "They've decided to hold an unofficial interrogation of Itakura, to investigate his role in the development of that inhumane virus."

"I suppose that with Kashimura dead, that's all they can do."

"It's true that he led a scrupulous life to atone for his wrongdoings, but that doesn't change the fact that he was running away."

"Yes. I guess that wraps things up on this one," Kusanagi said.

"It's not over yet," Aramaki dissented.

"No?"

"I still have to have a little talk with Section 6 about this whole affair."

"Oh? But 'Motoko Kusanagi of Section 9' never did a thing to Section 6," Kusanagi said.

"Who said this had anything to do with you? I have a bone to pick with them about their excessive interference in our investigation."

"Ah."

Several minutes later.

Kusanagi was in the Dive Room with the memory box Roy Tairagi had left in her care.

Kusanagi dived into the Net within.

Everything was flooded with a blinding light.

Waves of heat and dazzling brightness streamed down from the summer sun.

A narrow road stretched out in front of Kusanagi. It was barely wide enough for a single car. Both sides of the street were lined by rows of shops.

There was no arcade overhead, and the world flags decorating the street drooped listlessly in the summer sun.

Ogikubo Lily-of-the-Valley South Shopping Street.

This was the space Tairagi had created to preserve a neighborhood of the past.

Just moments before Tokyo had been obliterated.

A memory—left behind by Tairagi's dead wife.
Interred forever in this Net.

A single black cat appeared in front of Kusanagi.

"Tairagi . . ." Kusanagi called to the cat.

"Meow," the cat replied tersely, and began to walk down the street as if inviting Kusanagi to follow.

Kusanagi had passed the memory on to Baoshi.

Just as Roy Tairagi, AKA Igarashi, had requested.

The cat stopped in front of the familiar coffee shop.

It waited for the door to be opened.

Just as Kusanagi reached for the knob, she heard the cool chime of a bell as the door swung open. A woman waited inside.

"Welcome home," the woman said to the cat.

The black cat looked up at the woman. "Meow," it said simply.

The cat entered the shop and perched on a stool in front of the counter, gazing long and tenderly at the woman it loved.

Postscript

This is the third Stand Alone Complex novel, and I hope you enjoyed it.

The story places Motoko Kusanagi in the Tokyo of today.

The book sprouted from an idea that came to me when I was running all over Tokyo last spring, researching the script of the television anime *Otogizoushi*.

In the chinks of modern Tokyo neighborhoods like Shidome and Shinagawa, traces of the past still remain. This is true of Roppongi, too, and as I walked toward the Tokyo Tower, down below Mamianazaka where the Ministry of Justice is, I stumbled upon a section of town that retained the atmosphere of the Showa Era.

It made me realize how the past still lurks beneath the city's surface.

In the year 2030, too, perhaps a single stride could lead you into a corner of the city that harbored such vestiges. In the story, I developed this concept through the image of the resi-

dential neighborhood carved out of a hillside, outside of Oldtown Niihama.

Readers who have seen *Stand Alone Complex 2nd Gig* already know that in the story, Tokyo and the entire Kantō area have been destroyed, with the area inside of Loop 7 completely flooded.

I chose Ogikubo as the setting for this story because I felt that it was the neighborhood that was most likely to retain the most vitality in a ruined Tokyo.

In the reality in which we live, the shape of our city changes from day to day.

This phenomenon isn't limited to the downtown area; even in the neighborhood of Tokyo where I live, the landscape has changed dramatically over the last fifteen years.

I moved to a different part of Tokyo a year ago, and the other day I happened to go past the train station in my old neighborhood. The old-fashioned goldfish shop that used to be there had disappeared, replaced by studio apartments. The old man who used to sit out in front holding his Maltese was once a fixture of my daily commute. I wonder where he is now.

Seventeen years ago, I worked in graphic design for computer games, living in an apartment building in Kokubunji that housed a Buddhist altar shop. That building still stands, unchanged. Back then, I was a recent graduate, just starting out in my first apartment and job. I remember what it felt like to have no money, but to be faced with an infinite array of possibilities. As fate would have it, that building is about a one minute walk from my workplace at Studio I.G. Every time I look up at my old apartment, I'm brought

back to my beginnings and filled with motivation.

With the support of my readers, a helping hand from the people around me, and some determination on my part, I hope to make time between my other projects to bring you the next installment of this series.

Junichi Fujisaku

January 2005

At the office on a weekend (I need a vacation!)

About the author

Born on August 6, 1967, JUNICHI FUJISAKU was one of the first graduates of the Oshii Academy, an in-studio think tank created by acclaimed director Mamoru Oshii at the animation house Production I.G to train the next generation of writers, directors, and animators. Currently the Chief Director and scriptwriter for the Game Production Department of Production I.G, Fujisaku has also written almost a dozen episodes of the *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* television series, as well as co-developing *Blood the Last Vampire*, for which he was the director of the videogame version as well as writing one of the *Blood* novels and directing *Blood+*, the new television series, and the series *Yarudora*.

About the cover artists

KAZUTO NAKAZAWA (cover artist), born March 4, 1968 in the Niigata Prefecture, is an animator and illustrator. His major works include character design on *El Hazard: The Magnificent World*; *Legend of Black Heaven*; *Ashita no Nadja*; and *Samurai Champloo*. He also directed the anime portion of *Kill Bill* Volume 1, and was the key animator of "A Detective Story," a short film in *The Animatrix*.

HIROYUKI OKIURA (back cover)

Born October 13, 1966, in Osaka. Animator/director. Director and character designer for *Jin-Roh*, character designer and art director for *Ghost in the Shell*.