



GHOST IN THE SHELL

STAND ALONE COMPLEX

THE LOST MEMORY

JUNICHI FUJISAKU

A NEW NOVEL BASED ON THE HIT
FILMS AND TELEVISION SERIES!

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An era in which even if the entire Network connecting our minds were to channel the photons and electrons of our thoughts in a single direction, standalone individuals have not yet been converted to data to the extent that they become discrete components of a larger complex.

A.D. 2030

WITHDRAWN

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#01

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 These implantables gradually took over the outdated portable/wearable technology, to be recognized as the prototype of "Cyberbrain."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.

GHOST^{IN} THE SHELL

STAND ALONE COMPLEX

THE LOST MEMORY

Junichi Fujisaku

Cover illustration by Kazuto Nakazawa

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-fast 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.

GHOST IN THE SHELL: STAND ALONE COMPLEX—THE LOST MEMORY

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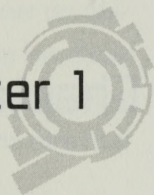
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Chapter 1



The man's hands shook as he grasped the control stick.
It was at that moment that the words flashed into his mind.

I loved you.

I was so proud of my strong father.

I'm still grateful to you.

But please don't forget me.

I'm sorry.


But I'm not ready to die yet.

It was his son.

The man let out a wail in the tiny cockpit.

A ball of red fire rose up in front of his eyes.

Chapter 2



"You are surrounded! Drop your weapons, release the hostages, and surrender immediately!"

"What a waste of time," Section 9's Motoko Kusanagi murmured under her breath. She was on the rooftop of a skyscraper and it was drizzling lightly. Given the way the police were handling this case, it was unlikely that they'd bring the situation under control anytime soon.

The lights of the police cars cast a red sheen on the policemen's shields, which were fanned out in a semicircle around the main entrance of Sakurai, an electronics superstore in the cyberbrain district. At the focal point of their arc, a teenage boy was holed up inside the store, his twenty-four hostages gathered around him.

Strapped to his chest was a live bomb.

The timer on the C4 bomb continued its merciless countdown. Less than five hundred seconds remained on the clock. In

addition to the device fixed to his chest, the boy held a Smith & Wesson .38-caliber Chief's Special revolver in his right hand. In his left hand, he grasped the bomb's detonator.

One hour earlier, the boy had appeared on the first floor of the electronics store, its showroom bustling with weekend shoppers. He had pulled the Smith & Wesson Chief out of the pocket of his blue jacket, blasted out all of the monitors on display, and taken hostages. As if to prove that the C4 on his chest was the real thing, the boy had announced that he'd set bombs on the cars parked in front of the store. One by one, the cars had exploded.

The soft rain had extinguished the flames from the blasts, leaving nothing but a line of iron lumps where the cars had been.

The news media was broadcasting these images over the Net. As she looked down on the incident from her vantage point atop the skyscraper, Kusanagi tuned into a channel that was running the story. The audio of the reporter's voice flashed into her cyberbrain. "... I repeat, the youth is demanding a direct apology by former superintendent general Daidō of the Metropolitan Police, who retired for health reasons. The police suspect this incident may have been related to the attempted assassination of superintendent Daidō several days ago during a police academy graduation ceremony. Authorities are demanding the young man's surrender."

The eyes of the entire nation watched the case develop, fixed on a single point by the news coverage.

The sharpshooters were already positioned, ready to snipe the boy the second the order was given. But with the news of ex-superintendent Daidō's corruption allegations fresh in people's minds, shooting down a minor as the world watched on would only worsen the backlash against the police. They had to handle this one delicately.

The news media zoomed in for a close-up of the bomb's timer: three hundred seconds left. It seemed as if the audience who was viewing the spectacle from the other end of the monitors would continue to look on even as the bomb exploded.

On the boy's chest, the bomb continued to tick off the seconds remaining until detonation.

As Motoko Kusanagi looked on, an electronic message from Section 9 Chief Daisuke Aramaki flashed into her cybernetic brain. *<Aramaki speaking. It's been settled. Just now, Section 9 was officially granted jurisdiction over this incident.>*

<Roger. Time to get to work. Here I go.>

This was the moment she'd been waiting for. Kusanagi dove straight down through the fine rain toward the city below.

"What's happening?" The boy holding the hostages stammered. Quiet.

The voice of the police negotiator had fallen silent. The line of policemen that had been positioned outside the store was gone—they were probably waiting just out of sight. The only sounds the boy could hear were the rain and the air conditioning.

He glanced at the media images, but they still showed the

shot of the police poised in front of the store with their shields at the ready.

False footage.

"I have hostages here! Don't you care what happens to them?" the boy shouted angrily.

But his only answer was silence.

A murmur rose up from the terrorized hostages. Someone let out a sob.

"Shut up!" The boy pointed his Smith and Wesson at the captives.

"That's enough." A strong voice cut through the rain.

The boy spun around.

A man stood at the store's entrance. His hulking figure was almost two meters tall. The eye sockets of the giant's stern face were lodged with the inorganic tubular lenses of cybernetic eyes. He gripped an enormous handgun—an FN Highpower—its barrel pointed squarely at the boy's head. On either side of him, a pair of multiped tanks stood poised for action.

A special police unit, the boy thought. But the man's uniform looked more like that of a special military unit than that of a cop.

"The entire area has been placed under special broadcast control. Scream all you like—nobody on the outside can hear your voice. You can try killing these hostages, but you only have five shots with that gun. I'll empty this thing right into your head before you even use them up," the big lens-eyed man said.

"Yeah? What about this? I'll kill everyone in here!" The boy

indicated the C4 bound to his chest and the detonator in his left hand.

The man let out a ferocious roar. "You want to blow that thing? Hurry up and do it! If you really wanted to, you would have done it by now!"

"Stay where you are! I'll push the button!" The boy waved the detonator wildly in front of him and stretched his thumb towards the switch.

Just then, one of the hostages behind the boy fell, as if pushed by an invisible force.

Something sliced through the rainy haze and grazed the boy's left hand.

The boy looked at his hand. His left thumb was gone.

The detonator fell to the floor with a thud.

On the floor behind him, the sniper's bullet had made a deep groove.

The boy realized what had happened.

It was a sharpshooter with the precision to shoot off only the thumb that would have triggered the detonator.

The gunshot and pain registered a split second later.

"AAAYiiiiiii!"

The boy's strained howl echoed through the room. At the same moment, his gun arm was twisted, and the force brought him crashing to the floor. He fired his Smith and Wesson at the hostages—but the bullet stopped in midair.

The boy tried to see who had thrown him down, but there was nobody there. He felt an invisible hand press on his neck and pull out the cable connected to his cybernetic brain.

"No!"

But his scream never shattered the air.

A cyberbrain lock had been plugged into the port in the boy's neck.

After the initial shock, his body went limp. The lock temporarily froze all of the brain's functions apart from those required to sustain life. In a cybernetic society, it served as the ultimate restraining device.

When he'd ceased to move, the owner of the invisible hand that had thrown the boy down showed herself.

"Situation under control."

After disabling her type-2902 thermoptic camouflage, Kusanagi continued to restrain the boy as she gazed up at the bullet that had frozen in its path. The air around the bullet wavered and the forms of two men became visible. Togusa and Paz, holding up bulletproof shields to protect the hostages, had turned off their optical camouflage. Lodged in the center of Togusa's shield was the flattened bullet from the 9mm .38-caliber Special.

"Glad I brought this. If that thing had nailed me in the wrong spot, I would've had to consider going cyborg, too." Togusa let out a sigh of relief.

"We're not done here," Kusanagi reminded him. "We still haven't removed the C4 on this kid." *<Saito, are the surroundings secure?>*

<No apparent accomplices in sight.> Saito, the sharpshooter who had taken out the boy's thumb, responded by cybercomm from his post on the roof of the opposite building.

<Roger.> Kusanagi messaged back and looked over at Togusa.

"Togusa, evacuate the hostages. Paz, get me information on the boy."

"Roger."

At Kusanagi's command, Togusa and Paz led the hostages out of the store.

Now it was just Kusanagi and the boy.

Kusanagi looked at the C4 bomb lashed to the boy's chest. The fuse and detonator were homemade. The bomb was equipped with a receiving device designed to respond to the detonator's electronic signal. The timer continued its silent countdown.

Sixty-two seconds remaining.

Batou peered over Kusanagi's shoulder at the timer.

"I don't know where he got it, but a C4 is the real deal. We could call over the bomb squad from the other side of the barricade, but they wouldn't have time to disarm it. Shall we handle this one ourselves?"

"First I need to extract the Good Morning Terrorism info from his cyberbrain."

Kusanagi sent a cybercomm to Ishikawa, who was back at Section 9 headquarters handling information control. <Ishikawa. Monitor me.>

<Roger. I can only maintain the communications block so much longer. Hurry, please.>

<We know.> Kusanagi replied as she pulled a cable out of the small box strapped to her hip and connected up to the cyberbrain lock that was restraining the boy.

"Batou, you remove the bomb while I'm inside."

"Wait. But then you'll . . ."

No response from Kusanagi. She had already dived into the boy's brain.

"Should've known," he sighed, shaking his head. "Tachikomas, prepare to disarm the C4."

<Roger!>

Batou eyed the motionless Kusanagi. "I guess I should take this to mean that you trust me?" he snorted as he began to remove the bomb from the boy's body.

An organic tangle of light and sound patterns. When memory was forwarded into a cyberbrain, it was recorded by a voltage conversion element called a tranz.

Kusanagi created a "key" as she plunged deeper and deeper towards the boy's ghost line—the boundary that set off the realm of organic memories from the system of digitized records that was the Net.

As she moved into each successive stage of his ghost line, she felt a slight discomfort from the mounting mecha-pressure. But Kusanagi harmonized her own level of consciousness with the boy's ghost, and the pressure dwindled as she assimilated to his sense of self.

As she passed through his cyberbrain level gate, she arrived in an area of his memory field with a high level of irregular cyberbrain activity.

<Memory field reached. What is the current state of contact between the boy and the external Net?> Kusanagi messaged Ishikawa, who was monitoring her activities from Section 9 headquarters.

His response was immediate. <The cyberbrain lock is working.

Nodes to the external Net are being rejected. There's no end to the rubberneckers trying to access the boy from the Net, but they're being repulsed by the broadcast control barrier.>

<Copy that. Continue monitoring.>

Kusanagi perused the boy's memory. She didn't actually see his memories visually, but she perceived them.

She conveyed what she found to Ishikawa. In order to make her cyberbrain investigation admissible as proof, she needed an external record of the log. The information moved through her linguistic center and out into the Net.

<The array needs to be optimized. The matrix is unstable.>

His memory field was a jumble of confused information, perhaps reflecting the boy's lifestyle. It certainly wasn't an efficient system of ordering one's memories. He seemed to just simply store his scattered experiences in whatever order they had been perceived.

A young girl's naked body.

How to load a gun.

A military training program.

A map of the cyberbrain district.

This month's school cafeteria menu.

Linear station search information.

The log of a cult news site . . .

The majority of his memories were just links to the Net.

<He's an information collector. Most of the links are broken. He's satisfied just collecting information and is completely incapable of organizing it—his chunking is inefficient, too. He must rely heavily on external memory—a typical Net addict.>

Kusanagi continued to dig down through the layers of information that floated in his memory field, moving progressively deeper.

The information became denser, and Kusanagi perceived this density as light. Each unit of information was a point of light, and when they grouped together, she registered the dense areas as large, luminous bodies. It was like being in outer space, surrounded by stars. She could also see other lights moving between these orbs. The cyberbrain lock had frozen them, but she knew that normally they would trace the movements of the nerve signals of the hippocampus.

Among the lights, she encountered dark spots that had begun to eat away at the luminescence.

<His memory is becoming fragmented. If this continues, his meaning connections could be lost.> Kusanagi put a freeze on the area. A closer inspection revealed that the fragmentation had already affected more than half of his memory.

<Ishikawa. I've identified a fragmented area within the target memory. It's the same as in the last twelve cases. Initiating transmission.>

<Roger. Receiving with Code-C.>

The circuit from Ishikawa closed, and the cyberbrain transmission began. There were twenty-four seconds left before detonation. The transmission would be complete in twenty-two seconds.

<Batou! How's the disarming coming?>

<I just have to remove one more belt, toss the thing in the OED drum, and we're done.>

<Retreat if you think it's going to blow.>

<What about you, Major?>

<The information transfer will finish two seconds before detonation. I'll continue transmitting until the last minute. As long as my brain shell survives I'll be all right.>

<Don't be stupid! With this sucker's blast even your titanium brain shell doesn't stand a chance!>

Even as they exchanged messages, time was running out. Twelve seconds left.

As Kusanagi monitored the memory transfer, an incomprehensible pattern caught her eye.

<What the . . . ?>

<Major, hurry!> A cybercomm from Batou flashed in.

Kusanagi snatched the strange pattern she was looking at and sent it to her own cyberbrain.

<Transmission complete.>

The instant she received Ishikawa's confirmation, Kusanagi disengaged her mind from the boy's cyberbrain.

Zero seconds left.

No time to retreat.

A deafening blast echoed right next to her.

The impact shocked the air and rattled her prosthetic body.

But she was unscathed.

"What happened?"

"I don't know how, but I did it." Batou was sprawled across her, shielding her with his body. Behind him, smoke from the explosion drifted up toward the sky from the EOD containment vessel. It was a cylindrical drum designed to minimize damage by channeling the bomb's energy vertically.

"Finished with two seconds on the clock."

The Tiltorotor sent off a spray of rain as it descended toward the street below. These rotary-winged flight vessels were Section 9's vehicle of choice when it came to aerial travel.

<Perpetrator apprehended in the act and removed from the scene. Tachikoma, load the boy onto the Tiltor before the police get to him.>

The Tachikoma multiped tank approached Kusanagi, waving its two manipulators. It had a hemispherical body, four legs, and a pod that could carry a human pilot on its back. "Major, Major! May I please analyze the cyberbrain of the perpetrator?" it chirped.

"No. That would make it inadmissible as evidence. Now, do as you're told."

"Roger!"

The Tachikoma picked up the boy in its manipulators and carried him into the cargo bay of the Tiltorotor.

The police authorities were standing down, securing the scene. The evacuated hostages had sustained only minor injuries, and damages were limited to the incinerated cars and blasted-out monitors.

"'One day I woke up a terrorist'—another Good Morning Terrorist, huh?" Batou remarked to Kusanagi as they stood side by side, watching the cleanup. "This is youth crime taken way too far. Kids these days."

The Good Morning Terrorists. The first incident had happened two years ago.

Early morning, October 22, 2028.

A fourteen-year-old boy named Tō Kasamatsu had burst into the central office of the Niihama newspaper and blown himself up with C4, killing three people and seriously wounding forty-two.

After the incident, the police had searched the boy's room but found nothing that shed light on the motive or circumstances behind his suicide attack. They'd questioned the boy's friends and family, but they came up empty-handed.

Further investigation had revealed that Kasamatsu had built the bomb himself, having found instructions on the Net and obtained the materials from a dealer that sold illegal materials.

To the experienced eye, the bomb was clearly an amateur job, and the crime lab file included the indelicate comment, "He was lucky the thing even exploded."

The prefectural police recorded the incident as a new type of impulse suicide, and everyone expected the investigation to end there.

But a year later, the next incident occurred.

October 18th, 2029.

Two fifteen-year-old boys, Kōji Hitachi and Shōgo Ōkami, had besieged the corporate housing facility of an aircraft maintenance company in Hakata, taking fourteen employees hostage. They were armed with a shotgun.

The gun came from a locker in the security office of the facility, where it was kept for self-defense purposes. They'd obtained it by assaulting the watchman just as he was opening the locker

with his cyberbrain pattern key.

When the prefectural cops had gotten the report and surrounded the compound, the boys shouted for them to “reveal the truth,” but made no more specific demands.

Holed up inside, the boys shot and killed hostage after hostage as the media broadcast the images to the world, forcing a police sharpshooter to gun them down, bringing the whole ugly event to a close. The subsequent investigation revealed that Hitachi and Ōkami had been two perfectly normal boys who had lived at the compound with their families.

The sudden outbreak of spontaneous youth crime prompted the public to nickname the phenomenon “Good Morning Terrorism.” Rumors circulated, attributing the crimes to poisoned electromagnetic waves, foreign intelligence agency plots, and cyberbrain viruses. In 2030, a new twist emerged in the crime wave.

September 12, 2030.

The turning point came when Makoto Yūki, sixteen, crashed a stolen car into the front entrance of the Hanamaki Police Station. Yūki’s thigh was shattered and he suffered some internal bleeding, but his cranium was undamaged. It was the first incident in which the authorities were able to hear the boy’s testimony and analyze his memories once his injuries had healed. When questioned, however, the boy responded that he didn’t know why he’d done it.

The boy had no evident background of anti-government activities. There was nothing suspicious in his everyday behavior,

and it seemed unlikely that his actions had been simply a fit of impulsive rage.

As the news media got a hold of the case, a widespread distrust of teenagers began to spread through society, and people became excessively fearful of youth crime. This exaggerated response by adults further alienated teens, resulting in an even greater upsurge in violence.

Up until this point, the investigations were handled by local police agencies. Public Safety Section 9, a counter-terrorism organization under the direct jurisdiction of the prime minister, became involved in the Good Morning Terrorist investigation when Section 9 Chief Aramaki grew suspicious that there was a connection between the epidemic of spontaneous terrorist attacks and the attempted assassination of superintendent general Daidō, whose protection was being overseen by Section 9.

A thorough investigation into the twelve cases that had been categorized Good Morning Terrorist attacks revealed no new clues or evidence. The only commonality was that after the incidents, partial fragmentation was discovered in the boys' memories, and the boys themselves were completely unable to remember why they had committed the attacks. In response, Section 9 resolved that when the next attack occurred, they would immediately create a record of the perpetrator's memory information at the scene of the crime.

Now, at the thirteenth incident, Section 9 had successfully intervened and obtained the relevant information, albeit in fragments.

o o o

The Tiltorotor carrying the boy rose up into the sky.

As Kusanagi watched it leave, she received a cybercomm from Paz.

<I got the kid's information. His name is Hisamitsu Shikawa. No record. Age sixteen. He attends the Niihama Ground Self-Defense Forces Cadet Technical School. His residence serial number is that of the school dorm.>

Next to her, Batou muttered, "So he's in the Ground SDF prep school. You don't suppose they've got some crazy shit mixed up in their curriculum, do you?"

The Niihama Ground SDF Cadet Technical School was the entry-level program of the Ground SDF education program. All it took to get in was reaching the age of fifteen and passing a simple entrance exam. As a result, students who had poor grades or who were deemed ill-equipped to pursue normal secondary education often wound up on their doorstep.

After graduating, it was possible to re-enter civilian educational institutions, but most students chose to enlist in the Ground Self-Defense Force. Nobody was denied a job in the military.

The curriculum differed from that of regular schools in that it included combat training as well as instruction in how to handle weapons and ordnance. In general, the school endeavored to instill a sense of solidarity and cohesiveness among its students as "troops," and all were required to leave home and experience communal life in the school dorms. The tabloids of-

ten ran colorful stories about the severity of the curriculum and rumors of brainwashing activities.

Given the unique environment, some kind of mental manipulation was a possibility. "We'll have to look into the educational methods currently in use," Kusanagi responded after a moment's thought. "I'll head over to the Niihama Ground SDF Cadet School. Togusa, you come too."

"Copy that."

"Right. I guess that means I'm free to go back to standby at home," Batou raised his hand in farewell, but Kusanagi stopped him.

"Didn't you get the chief's message?"

"What message?"

"Your standby orders have been canceled. Batou, Saito, Paz, and Borma, all of you are being sent to directly to the summit in Hakata. The chief says to make sure the place is secure."

"What? Nobody told me! That's police work!"

"Weren't you the one who said we can't count on them? That's why I nominated you!"

"You've gotta be kidding!"

Chapter 3



<You're kidding!> Yō Kazei responded dubiously to the cyber-brain message from his classmate, Tomoharu Takegawa. <You're pulling my leg, right, Takegawa?>

<Don't be dumb, Kazei—why would I lie to you? I'm serious—a student from our school actually strapped on a bomb and took a bunch of people hostage in the Niihama cyberbrain district. They took him down with a special unit and the cops nabbed him!>

<No shit! Who at our school has the balls to pull that kind of thing?>

<You're never going to believe this. It was Shikawa.>

<Shikawa?>

Kazei glanced over at the empty bed against the opposite wall. Come to think of it, he hadn't seen his roommate since yesterday.

<But Shikawa's one of those guys who spends every hour of the day

that we're not training holed up in our room, diving the Net. There's no way he'd be capable of something like that!>

<I didn't believe it at first either. Get on the Net and see for yourself. You can connect now, can't you?>

<Yeah, more or less. Okay. Talk to you later.>

It was early afternoon in the student dormitory of the Niihama Ground Self-Defense Forces Cadet Technical School. Kazei flopped down on his bed and closed the conversation, then began searching the news channels, shutting his eyes to help himself concentrate. He didn't have the skills to connect to the Net while processing visual stimuli from the external world.

Niihama. Cyberbrain district. Gun. Incident. He sent keywords from his language field to the Net search zone in his cyberbrain.

Instantly, more than three hundred thousand hits came up. Kazei added conditional terms to narrow the search. Teenager. Age sixteen. Now there were around fifty thousand hits. When he included the name of his own school, the Niihama Ground Self-Defense Forces Cadet Technical School, there were still more than one thousand hits.

It occurred to Kazei that this search process was not unlike the feeling of trying desperately to remember something. He recalled that someone had once told him that the quickest way to master the use of your cyberbrain was to think of it as an extension of yourself. He struggled to control the still-unfamiliar device, frustrated by his own ineptitude.

It was at times like these that he felt like he would never adapt to a world in which cyberbrains were the norm.

After the nuclear winter at the end of the last century, the protracted fourth Non-Nuclear World War had served as a catalyst for scientific and technological innovation. Society was revolutionized when prosthetic bodies developed as an extension of prosthetic hands and limbs, leading to cyborg technology, and the introduction of micromachines made cyberbrains possible.

In 2003, the first cyberbrain-equipped soldiers had appeared on the front lines, and as technologies that linked the human brain to external devices became more sophisticated, understanding of the brain itself made tremendous strides.

In 2015, scientists mapped the structure of memory, and human beings obtained the ability to control memory as data. For the first time, the brain was linked directly to the Net, allowing the massive quantities of information therein to be utilized as external memory with optimal efficiency.

The practice of embedding the brain with micromachines so that it could operate as an independent terminal spread like wildfire, transforming human beings into Units floating in a sea of information.

Connecting one terminal directly to another became an efficient way to exchange information, and people began to apply this technique to their own brains. Peoples' lives were gradually transformed as they became able to transmit their thoughts directly to another party's cyberbrain, and communication no longer relied on information obtained through one's own sense of sight, hearing, smell, touch, or taste. In 2027, the government declared Japan a Cyberbrain Nation, officially

acknowledging the importance of the relationship between human beings and the cyberbrain.

Nowadays, some people implanted micromachines in their children before they could even talk, making it possible to track their whereabouts as a countermeasure against the increasingly widespread threat of kidnapping. Needless to say, the ethical questions this posed led to widespread debate, resulting in conflicts such as the Cyberbrain Pollution White Paper Controversy of 2024. However, this in itself was indicative of how deeply ingrained in society cyberbrain technology had become.

Meanwhile, it became apparent that some people were constitutionally unsuited to cyberization—the process of having cybernetic brain implants installed. Kazei was one of those people. Physiologically, he was perfectly healthy. But in an information-based world, being unable to access data was paramount to being unable to function in society.

School was no exception. Classes were “Cyberbrain Use Recommended,” and unciberized students had no choice but to use terminals to access the Network. This enabled them to use the Net only in very limited ways—they didn’t even come close to taking full advantage of the Net. It was like an insurmountable wall. Everyone knew that it was only a matter of time before “recommended” became “required.” Life was not easy for those who bore the label of Cyberbrain Maladaptive.

That was just how things were in 2030.

Until recently, Kazei’s condition had been a major impediment. With no cyberbrain, all he could do was wait for some-

thing to come along and change the world in which he lived.

Eventually, something did. Technologies were developed that allowed Cyberbrain Maladaptation to be overcome, enabling Kazei to finally receive implants. He had been cyberized just two weeks ago. Adjusting to a cyberbrain so late in life was like being relegated to the status of a baby learning to walk.

Whenever Kazei felt the tranz implanted in the back of his head or the terminals in his neck, he felt a surge of satisfaction at finally having become a true member of society.

Now things looked different to him when he walked through town. Before he had his cyberbrain, the Net access cables that clung to the walls of the buildings had seemed hideous to him, like parasitic worms inhabiting the city. But the cyberbrain had transformed his life, and now he even felt that they ought to install more cables and create more infrastructure.

Not that he had mastered the use of his cyberbrain yet. He'd only learned its most basic function—that of connecting to the Net. It was all he could do to establish a direct brain transmission with a specific party and to peruse relatively shallow areas of the Net. In all honesty, part of him was still frightened to go any deeper—as if he might drown in the Web's ocean and never be able to get back.

Brushing aside such fears, Kazei extracted the visual information of Shikawa's face from his memory field and sent it to the tranz.

A hit.

He downloaded the record from the Net into his cyberbrain

and opened it. It was footage of the incident. The image of a young man terrorizing hostages on the first floor of a major electronics store came to life. It was a face Kazei knew well.

"Shikawa!"

Shikawa's nickname had been White Piggy, on account of his pallid face and chubbiness. He was introverted and was constantly connected to the Net—a borderline Net addict, even. In principle, Net use was prohibited on campus, and there was a transmissions block in place to control unauthorized cyber-brain usage, a measure that Shikawa loathed. He spent most of his time alone in his room, and there was something about him that kept the others from approaching him. Kazei's main impression of Shikawa was that you never knew what he was thinking.

"Why would he take people hostage with a bomb and a gun?" Kazei asked himself in disbelief. The question lodged in his mind like a nail. Kazei had probably seen more of Shikawa than anyone else in the past few years, but he had no idea what might have driven Shikawa to do something like this.

Somebody knocked at his wooden door.

"Takegawa?"

Guy sure has a lot of spare time, Kazei thought. He assumed that his classmate in the next dorm room, Tomoharu Takegawa, was coming over to his room after Kazei had terminated their cyber-comm conversation a few minutes earlier.

"It's open," he shouted towards the ceiling, still sprawled out on his bed.

But contrary to his expectations, the door opened to reveal a woman he'd never seen before. She wore a coat made of synthetic material. Underneath, he glimpsed a generous bust peeking out from her revealing top. Behind her stood the housemaster, wearing an unusually uneasy expression.

Instinctively, Kazei sat up.

The woman glanced his way only briefly before entering the room and giving it a quick once-over. "This is Hisamitsu Shikawa's room?" she asked the housemaster without taking her eyes off Shikawa's bed and desk.

The housemaster nodded his head excessively, causing Kazei to roll his eyes internally. Usually, the housemaster took every opportunity to lord it over the students that they had nowhere else to go than a school like this, but when high-ranking military observers or government officials paid a visit, his manner changed completely. In the presence of authority figures, his swaggering was replaced by meek obeisance. From the way he was acting now, Kazei got a pretty good sense of what kind of status this woman had.

Kazei's eyes met those of the housemaster, and the latter coughed uncomfortably a few times. "This woman is from the police," he told to Kazei in a pompous tone. "You've, *ahem*, caused some trouble for them in the past, *ahem*, so I'd like you to be on your best, *ahem*, behavior."

Why do you have to go there? Kazei felt a wave of impotent anger at both the housemaster's tone and his attitude. He was always looking down his nose at Kazei. It sure would feel good to

take one of the simulation bombs they used for training—the ones that only produced smoke and noise—and set it off at the door to his room.

Indulging in these little fantasies was the only thing Kazei could do to quell his indignation.

The housemaster followed the policewoman around, peering over her shoulder and trying to make conversation. The woman ignored him completely as she took her own sweet time going through Shikawa's desk. It was littered with arcane machinery and terminals.

About half of the students of the Niihama Ground SDF Cadet Technical School had an actual interest in engineering. The other half were kids with nothing to do and nowhere to go who had joined the military to give vent to their excessive youthful energy. Shikawa unmistakably belonged to the former group, Kazei to the latter.

On a number of occasions, Kazei had watched Shikawa stay up past lights out, assembling various gadgets he'd purchased in the cyberbrain district to trick out his cyberbrain. Even when Kazei complained that the light was keeping him up, Shikawa would obstinately persevere, claiming that he was almost done. Of these devices, pretty much the only one that Kazei could identify was the Paper Monitor, a tool that could be used to project the brain's visual perceptions.

The woman picked up the ten-centimeter metal cube from the desk and connected it to a cable that extended from her waist area.

"Full of unedited images." She sounded bored as she returned the box to the desk and took three folded pieces of paper out of the inner pocket of her coat.

"I'm exercising my investigational authority to take temporary possession of his belongings. Sign here."

The housemaster took the paper and hurried off, muttering something about needing permission from the director. His rapid footsteps faded into the distance, and Kazei was left alone with the woman.

Kazei continued to sit on his bed, not moving. He wished he could leave the room, too. He hoped the woman would be gone soon.

As if she knew what he was thinking, the woman turned and looked at him.

Their eyes met.

"Are you a friend of Shikawa's?"

Kazei was unable to answer at first. He was overcome by the woman's aura.

His throat felt completely dry.

"Did you notice anything unusual about him this past week?"

"N-not especially."

"Anything different about the way he looked or acted when he was in the room?"

"Whenever he was here, he was always connected to the Net. Other than the fact that he was always building who-knows-what . . ."

"Do you know what kind of Nets he was into?"

"As if I could get to the places he went! I was only cyberized recently . . ."

A flicker of emotion registered in the woman's eyes—a sort of mild surprise, perhaps. She looked at Kazei with curiosity. People without cyberbrains were a rarer segment of society than the unemployed. Kazei felt the need to explain himself.

"I was Cyberbrain Maladaptive."

"Is that so?" the woman continued to gaze into his face.

An unbearable silence filled the room.

Then the woman spoke. "Yō Kazei. Cyberbrain authorization number C-72GTH3004. Requires regular exams due to Type 3 Cyberbrain Disability. And . . . a record of three juvenile arrests."

Her words froze him. With absolutely no warning, this woman was recounting Kazei's past.

"I just searched the records in the MHLW database," she said.

The MHLW? The personal records housed at the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare shouldn't have been accessible to a third party except under exceptional circumstances. Their Net terminal itself was also reinforced with heavy barriers to prevent hacking and other unauthorized access. Even an unciberized child knew that. But the woman standing before Kazei had broken through these barriers in hardly any time at all and obtained personal information about him.

Who the hell was she, anyway?

Just then, the housemaster returned, this time accompanied by a young man in a jacket. Probably another detective.

"Major, we've acquired the documents."

The young detective handed a file to the woman.

"Roger. Collect the documented items and remove them."

The woman put the file away in her inner coat pocket and left the room.

Major? Kazei thought. The man had called the female detective "major." A high-ranking official ought to be called a station sergeant or superintendent. Titles like "major" were only used in the armed forces. Kazei knew that there were a few special instructors at the Niihama Ground SDF Cadet Technical School who held that rank.

So she was military.

But the housemaster had said she was from the police.

Who was she?

Shikawa's terrorist attack should have been the stuff of a police investigation. But Kazei couldn't shake the impression that a greater force was at work.

When the "major" and the young detective had left, a flood of officers wearing jumpsuits emblazoned with the logo of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police poured into the room and began collecting Shikawa's belongings. They took everything Shikawa had used in his daily life, from his wastebasket to his dorm bed.

In the space of ten minutes, every trace of Shikawa was gone, and Kazei was left in a room that felt too big for just one person. The only evidence left that Shikawa had been there were the silhouette of his bed on the sun-bleached wallpaper and floor and its footprints in the dust.

It made Kazei uncomfortable.

Shikawa was probably not coming back. They had been roommates for three months, but Kazei couldn't remember the two of them ever really talking or doing anything together.

It wasn't that he missed Shikawa. Still, he was overcome by a feeling of emptiness. The atmosphere in the room was becoming unbearable.

"Hey! I hear the cops were here!" Takegawa, the bad influence from the next room, barged in without knocking.

"It wasn't the cops."

"The housemaster said it was. I got a glimpse of them, too—a woman with an amazing body and a young, geeky-looking detective guy."

"The woman was a major."

"A major?"

"Yeah. The young detective called her that."

"It's probably a cop nickname. That younger guy was a police detective if I ever saw one. Besides, what about all those guys wearing jumpsuits with the police logo? I hear they went into the classroom and training grounds, too, and took everything from Shikawa's desk to his locker!" Takegawa glanced at the empty half of the room.

"They cleaned this place out, too, huh? So, you didn't learn anything?"

"About what?"

"About Shikawa, you dope."

"Why the hell would I?" Kazei grabbed the jacket hanging over his chair. He wanted to get out of the room. The old wounds

that the woman called "Major" had inadvertently exposed were still plaguing a corner of his mind.

"Where're you going?"

"It feels weird in here. I'm gonna get some air."

"The cyberbrain district?"

Anywhere would do. Kazei grunted a noncommittal reply and left the room.

Chapter 4



Section 9 had its own crime lab.

Informally dubbed the Red Suits, they were an analytical body under the direct control of Public Safety Section 9, the assault squad whose job it was to prevent both cyber- and armed-terrorist attacks. Because the work demanded lightning-fast and wide-ranging crime-fighting knowledge, the team was comprised of only the most talented technicians.

Right now, the Red Suits were gathered around the prone body of a teenage boy—Hisamitsu Shikawa, a suspected Good Morning Terrorist that Section 9 had taken into custody in the Niihama Cyberbrain District. A cable ran from the connector at the boy's neck to a wall-mounted terminal, where a monitor broadcast the information from the boy's cyberbrain.

"There's no memory adhesion, so it looks like we can rule out Juvenile Cyberbrain Disorder."

"He's got a pretty strong barrier for an amateur. Looks like he's taken a commercial one and customized it himself."

"It's strong, but it's not flexible. Getting past this type of barrier isn't all that hard, really."

"An amateur is an amateur. The kid's just a hobbyist. We can't rule out the possibility that this whole thing was an accident caused by his half-assed tinkering with his own cyberbrain. Look at these anomalous waves it's emitting. These are the kind of waves you see when a barrier's functioning incompatibly with a virus protection program."

"Spare us the theories, boys," Kusanagi entered the room, caustically interrupting the Red Suits' long-winded discussion.

The Red Suits refrained from protest—they knew her well enough to realize they'd be wasting their breath.

"If you don't mind, I'm here for the results of your investigation into what caused this boy to go psycho in the cyberbrain district," she said.

"To our knowledge, the possibility that an outside party assumed coercive control of Hisamitsu Shikawa by breaking into the subject's cyberbrain is close to zero."

"In other words, you found no evidence of a virus contracted through a downloaded file, or of coercive interference by way of a ghost hack?"

"That's right. We're all in agreement. The boy strapped on a gun and a C4 bomb, took those hostages, and wreaked havoc in the cyberbrain district of his own volition."

"We've found no evidence that this boy had any ideological tendencies of that nature. We know from his access log that he lived his life on the Net, avoiding interpersonal interaction as much as possible—he may have been somewhat Net-addicted,

but other than that he was an average teenager. Are you telling me that he committed this crime impulsively, for no special reason?"

"That's how it looks. And if so, the fact that he's a teenager might be the reason."

"Being young is the reason? That's a pretty extreme conclusion."

"It may just be the ugly truth. A teen's sense of their relationship to society is both immature and self-centered. That's precisely why they're reluctant to submissively alter themselves to fit their environment—they'd rather attempt to impose changes on their environments. This leads us to the unfortunate conclusion that all teenagers have the potential to commit a sudden terrorist act of this kind during this immature phase of life. Perhaps the only way we can contain them is through iron-fisted disciplinary education, genetic treatments, or even forcible elimination."

"The hard-line approach, eh? I'm sure that sort of thing would generate a fair bit of controversy. What about drugs?"

"We tested his body for narcotic residue, but he came up negative for all cyberbrain and conventional drugs."

Cyberbrain drugs were stimulatory programs that acted on the micromachines in a cyberbrain to facilitate the excretion of dopamine in the nucleus accumbens. Dopamine is a substance released when the nerve cells known as neurons send each other signals. It activates the neuron's dopamine receivers to elicit any of a number of changes in the receiving neuron, including

changing its electrical charge or stimulating information transmissions within the cell.

When dopamine causes a transmission defect in the brain, symptoms such as hallucination and paranoia could combine with a loss of control over actions and speech, resulting in obsessive-compulsive behavior such as knowingly repeating the same redundant act again and again. Drugs such as cocaine and amphetamines can cause the same symptoms.

Because cyberdrugs could produce the same effects as narcotics, they presented a threat on par with that of cyberbrain viruses, and their proliferation was considered a social malaise. But most of the cyberdrugs distributed on the Net had effects quite different from those of conventional narcotics. "Sessioning," the practice of combining cyberdrugs with regular drugs to intensify the experience, was the current rage.

"No drug use, huh?"

"According to the data. The MMD on the cart there contains a detailed report of the forensic tests. We were going to submit it to Chief Aramaki."

"I'll take it to him."

Kusanagi picked up the micro mini disk that the Red Suit had indicated and left the room. As she walked down the corridor at Public Safety Section 9, she reviewed the case in her head.

A teenager who had lived a normal life up until one day ago had committed an act of compulsive terrorism of his own volition, without being infected by a virus or being ghost-hacked. Both the circumstances and the analytical results made that

clear. Then what was his motive? She continued to ponder the question as she made her way down the hallway toward Aramaki's office to make her report.

They had uncovered no clues to the boy's motive from the belongings they had secured from his room. The external memory device had revealed content much like that of Shikawa's memory—tens of thousands of 3-D images of naked teenaged girls, and several model-data files that simulated tactile experiences in the cyberbrain. They had checked the files for viruses, but the only ones they found were the same common spam programs that had been around since the beginnings of the Net. None of them were ghost-hack programs with the potential to hijack someone's cyberbrain.

Kusanagi knocked lightly on the heavy wooden door of the chief's office.

"Come in."

She opened the door. On the other side of an elegant sitting-room arrangement, a bespectacled man sitting behind a mahogany desk was busily examining a stack of documents.

He was an older man of small stature, but he still cut an imposing figure in his immaculate double-breasted suit. The white hair encircling his balding pate was reminiscent of a lion's mane.

This was Daisuke Aramaki, the top dog of Public Safety Section 9, the counter-terrorist organization that reported directly to the Prime Minister of Japan. Armed with guns, tanks,

and a strong sense of justice, he faced down corrupt, money-embezzling politicians and terrorists bent on overthrowing the state.

Kusanagi approached him. "Chief, I have the forensic report for the thirteenth Good Morning Terrorist case."

Aramaki stopped working. He pushed his glasses up onto his forehead and turned his penetrating gaze on Kusanagi.

"Let me guess—same as the previous cases?" He asked, slowly folding his hands on his desk. "I can tell from the look on your face."

Kusanagi shrugged her shoulders. "Exactly. Case thirteen looks just like the first twelve cases. That's all I have to report."

"I suppose Hisamitsu Shikawa's testimony will probably be the same, too."

"Probably." Kusanagi sank down into the sofa opposite the desk. "He'll probably say, 'I don't remember that—did I really do those things?' As in the other twelve cases, his memory of the 168 hours prior to the incident is fragmented and unintelligible. We went over his Net access log, too, but there's no evidence of him accessing a site or downloading a program that might contain orders of this kind."

"Then the impetus didn't come from the Net."

"Apparently not."

"Then I suppose it comes down to whether or not there's a connection to the Laughing Man-related attack on the police superintendent."

"I agree."

o o o

The Laughing Man case.

It had all begun in the year 2024.

Ernest Serano, CEO of the burgeoning micromachine powerhouse Serano Genomics, had left home for work one morning and wasn't seen for three days.

On the morning of the fourth day, Serano had reappeared in a live weather report being shot in downtown Niihama—with a Smith and Wesson held to his back by a man completely concealed by a blue parka, the hood pulled down to his eyes and a hat on top of that.

"Tell them the truth!" the man with the gun had ordered Serano. When the assailant had noticed the news cameras trying to film his face, he'd hacked into every single image-recording terminal on site, including the visual matrixes of the onlookers' cyberbrains, masking the images instantly.

When he'd learned from the broadcasts that the police were mobilizing, the man had fled, leaving Serano behind. During his flight, the man hacked into the cyberbrains of every passerby, overwriting the image of his face in their visual memories with a mask. The only people who actually saw his face were two homeless people who weren't cyberized. It was a whole new kind of crime—one that was only possible in a society so dependent on cybernetic implants.

Later, the perpetrator became known as the Laughing Man, a name derived from the masking image he'd used to overwrite people's memories.

After the kidnapping incident, Serano Genomics received a letter from someone who claimed to have infected their micro-machines with a virus that would provoke murders. The missive was signed "the Laughing Man." The company's credibility suffered, and soon it was struggling to stay afloat.

The Japanese government decided to provide an injection of public funds, both to rescue the jobs of the company's employees and to prop up the micromachine industry, an important pillar of the national economy. Immediately, the Laughing Man rescinded the threat, declaring that he was willing to "let it go." Instead, he turned his attention to threatening the micro-machine manufacturer that had replaced Serano as industry leader.

Again, the government had rushed to the company's aid. This game of cat and mouse between the Laughing Man and the government continued, involving a total of six companies including Serano Genomics.

Even after the Laughing Man had declared his complete withdrawal, the string of crimes remained unsolved. Six years later, when the Laughing Man had all but faded from society's memory, the mysterious perpetrator had surfaced once again.

A special police team that was still investigating the Laughing Man's case had come under criticism when they were revealed to have made illicit use of Interceptors, a type of visual bugging device. At the press conference they had called to make a public apology, the Laughing Man had issued an assassination threat on the police superintendent.

On the indicated day, when the superintendent was about to give his speech at the police academy graduation ceremony, all hell broke loose. A delayed-action virus had been sent in fragments through the communications system of the superintendent's bodyguards. When the virus launched, one of the guards had attacked the superintendent with his electromagnetic baton. Numerous self-proclaimed Laughing Men had appeared throughout the hall, and each had attempted to take the superintendent's life.

"In that incident, we only found the fragmented, delayed-action virus used by A. Nanao in the first bodyguard who snapped. The rest were all clean," Aramaki recalled.

"Yes. The other perpetrators all claimed they'd interpreted the Laughing Man's death threat on the superintendent as a personal mission, and had resolved independently to obey. They all acted simultaneously, committing the same crime with no apparent lateral connection coordinating their behavior. It wasn't so much a coordinated terrorist attack as a phenomenon—a stand alone complex, so to speak."

"Do you think there's a relationship between these cases and the Laughing Man incidents?" he asked her.

Kusanagi let out a long exhale and looked at Aramaki. "At first glance, Hisamitsu Shikawa's case seems to imitate the Laughing Man incident of six years ago—the Serano kidnapping," she replied. "But the impetus behind it seems more shortsighted and lacking in depth. The same is true of the other twelve cases. And there haven't been enough incidents reported

to qualify it as a 'phenomenon.' Our only recourse is to investigate why teenagers with no motive have turned to terrorism without warning. But by obtaining the disappearing memory from the perpetrators' cyberbrains directly after their crimes, I think we're finally starting to make a bit of headway."

"What's the word on the analysis of that information?"

"Ishikawa's conducting an exhaustive investigation focused on examining reports of similar disabilities and memory fragmentation."

"This case is important, but the Micromachine Environmental Summit in Hakata is also coming up. Osmal Najif will be attending, and we've been charged with his protection."

"Osmal Najif—the man who established peace in the Middle East. There certainly has been no shortage of attempts on his life, but from my understanding he's managed to foil them by always changing his schedule without warning. I thought his protection was handled by rent-a-cops. Is Section 9 taking over?"

"That's right." Aramaki hit a button on his desk and the image of a man appeared on a wall-mounted screen.

Osmal Najif. He was the mediator who had brought an end to the longstanding ethnic conflicts in the Middle East, and he was also the spokesperson of the interim New Middle Eastern Coalition.

He had advocated the theory that poverty breeds conflict, and that destitution causes people to resort to terrorism. His homeland had been a crossroads of the Opium Road, and the

drugs refined from the poppies cultivated there had constituted an important source of funding for the guerilla warriors. Najif had called for the eradication of the narcotics industry, obtaining assistance from UN forces to burn down the poppy fields. Next, he'd worked to build a strong micromachine industry from the ashes, providing incentives for companies to build on the ravaged land. He maintained that if industry could take root and bring prosperity to the people, they would no longer be driven to violence—a stance that drew widespread support.

"There's a chance that the drug traffickers who lost their incomes are plotting something. One of the domestic black markets is run by the Red Sands, an obscure international drug ring. There's a report that they have dealings with the Sadoyama Group. I have Batou and company on the case already."

"You want me to join them?"

"Is there a problem with that?"

"No. If the Good Morning Terrorist cases are ultimately just an attempt to shake up society, we can leave them to the cops. It's just—"

"Just what?"

"I get the feeling that this thing is just getting started. The crimes have taken different forms, but the teens have all been oriented toward the same goal—disclosure of 'the truth.' They're on different vectors, but radiating towards the same point. We still don't know what their purpose is, but I sense they have an aim of some kind, something different from that of the Laughing Man phenomenon."

There was a brief silence before Aramaki responded.

"Very well. There's bound to be parallel terrorist activity related to the summit aside from a potential attack on Najif. It's important that we follow up on any uncertainties. I'd like you to continue pursuing the Good Morning Terrorist case, Major. That will be all."

"Roger."

Kusanagi left the office and headed for the Dive Room. This was the base from which they investigated cyberbrain-related crime, and it contained several dive devices equipped with expensive dummy barriers.

In the center of the overly air-conditioned room, one of the dive devices was currently in use. An unkempt man with a beard was diving the Net through one of the dummy barriers.

Kusanagi approached the dummy barrier, extended a cable from the back of her neck, and connected it to the dive device. An interface opened in her cyberbrain as Net information was converted by her tranz and displayed in her visual field. She searched the Net for the path Ishikawa was connected to and linked to it with her own cyberbrain.

Youth crime.

Indiscriminate terrorism.

Laughing Man.

Virus . . .

Search information related to the teenager's crime unfolded continually. Ishikawa quickly organized and classified the tens of

thousands of headings that emerged. From the profiles broadcast by news sites to the regular reports issued by the police public safety surveillance networks and patrolling officers, he collected only the information he judged to be relevant, tossing it into his cart. Irrelevant information was loaded onto his firepit and eliminated. It differed from a trashcan in that items relegated here were irretrievable. Ishikawa's decisions were based on his veteran intuition.

The process came to a halt. Kusanagi disconnected the cable and exited the Net. Ishikawa disconnected from the dummy barrier, removed a cigarette from the pack in his shirt pocket and lit up, inhaling deeply. The tip of his cigarette glowed red and turned to ash.

"Any progress?"

Ishikawa responded to Kusanagi's question with a long stream of blue-white smoke. Before the cloud could disperse, it was sucked away by an exhaust fan in the ceiling.

"I haven't found anything conclusive."

He looked at Kusanagi. Her face showed signs of exhaustion.

"Normally, memory fragmentation is more pronounced as you go back in time," he explained. "But in Shikawa's case, his memory is at 97 percent on the day of the incident. That's where it peaks, with dramatic memory loss during the previous 170 hours—sometimes exceeding 87 percent. With numbers like this, it seems less like fragmentation and more like the vestiges of outright obliteration. Normally, if a person has memories that are significant to them, those memories are firmly estab-

lished in the peripheries. They survive because they're associated with other memories. But in this cyberbrain, not even those memories are left. They've been wiped out at the root."

"How?"

"We have to look at the state of fragmentation. With a ghost hack or some other kind of external interference, it's possible to delete a person's memory without leaving behind evidence. In these cases, however, because the interference takes place over a longer period of time, some branches usually remain. In a case like this where we're seeing a lot of fragmented remains, it looks more like some kind of automatic deletion program was loaded."

"What about the trends in the degree of fragmentation?"

"They're consistent with the simulation I ran. It's probably the same program. I don't think there's any point to searching the Net further. I want to try restoring the fragmented memory now."

Ishikawa pointed at the memory box sitting nearby. "This is a backup of Shikawa's memory. I was going to dive into it next."

He stretched, his tense muscles giving off a popping sound. He was just about to don the dive equipment again when Kusanagi stopped him.

"I'll do it. Back me up."

Immediately, she dove into the luminous sea of information.

She found the address of Shikawa's memory field in the fragmented memory and dove towards it.

The lights became denser.

She began to feel a slight sense of mecha-pressure.

To reduce the strain, she worked to nullify her own identity in the cyberbrain.

Conditions in the cyberbrain stabilized.

Kusanagi jumped straight to the address she'd found when she'd dived into Shikawa's brain back in the cyberbrain district.

Fragmented memories floated before her. Her visual field interpreted the fragments as 2-D disks with pieces missing here and there. The fine circuitry that extended from their edges was broken, detaching them from the network that stretched across his memory field. Kusanagi reached for one of the fragments. She didn't reach out her actual hand—but her phantom self projected in cyberbrain space did.

This one looks restorable.

Her hand touched the fragment.

The fragment trembled minutely. The circuits extending from it began to move, searching for somewhere to connect. Kusanagi withdrew a cable from her own body and linked it to the circuit. The fragment stopped trembling and its voids began to regenerate until it was a complete disk.

Now it was transforming into a moving image.

<Is it a visual memory?>

Kusanagi replayed the image.

She searched for memories that recorded information drawn from Shikawa's sensory organs while emulating projected memories based on the memory fragments, projecting the data as visual information. It replayed at the speed of a time-lapse film.

Related memories began to connect together to form moving images. They weren't like the vivid mental pictures that could be spun together from threads of memory, but rather memories recorded and accumulated as information in the cyberbrain.

The image of a woman took shape. She wore a white shirt that was unbuttoned down the front. Striking a suggestive pose, she beckoned to the viewer.

<No reality here.>

From what she knew of Shikawa's lifestyle, Kusanagi found it doubtful that the memory was based on personal experience.

<Probably a store-bought memory from one of those Dreameries.> Ishikawa commented. *<If it has adult content, it's probably a geek item traded through P2P channels. They started out as memory treatment programs for people whose memories went out of control and overflowed when they were cyberized. Before long, they became established as a commercial product.>*

<A highly directional pseudo-memory, huh?>

Kusanagi remembered when installing pseudo-memories in one's cyberbrain had been all the rage. The idea was to enjoy a simulated physical experience recreationally by replaying pieces of information created by a memory designer.

Sadness, happiness, fear—these emotions were all triggered because we associate them with the memory of certain situations. Take, for example, someone with a fear of dogs. Their phobia is caused by a strong link between the concept of a dog and a frightening memory of being barked at or bitten. In order to overcome their fear, all the subject needs to do is sever the link between the concept of a dog and the traumatic experi-

ence in his memory. Conversely, if he acquires a large number of pleasant memories pertaining to dogs, the sight of a dog will begin to trigger feelings of happiness.

Soon, these memory-inducement programs developed for medical purposes gave rise to a slew of pseudo-memory products.

When people dream, an internal mechanism sorts through their memories, deciding what to forget and what to store. By grafting in pieces of information among the memories slated for storage, it was possible to induce certain dreams.

These pseudo-memories differed from movies in that the same program could create different content when influenced by the will of the user. The ability to have dreams that ended differently each time became a popular mode of entertainment in the cyberbrain age. The businesses that sold these pseudo-memories became known as Dreameries.

When Dreameries first emerged, many people were drawn by the novelty of the phenomenon. But now the industry was supported only by a niche of fanatics, and even that market was dwindling.

Kusanagi began to replay the memory fragment. It was mostly visual information, although other sensory stimuli cropped up occasionally. So, this was the kind of thing this Shikawa kid was into.

<What's this?>

The fragment changed color.

This was no longer the adult entertainment she had been viewing.

A group of skyscrapers loomed in the rain.

<Ishikawa, find the buildings that correspond to this layout.>

<I'm already on it. It's a group of towers in Zone B4 of the Niihama Cyberbrain District,> Ishikawa responded.

<The graphic content is unstable. This region of his memory needs moving imagery to make sense,> he observed.

The still images were choppy, but they began to connect together. This seemed to be a less-fragmented region.

The footage was shaky. There was a feeling of intoxication, as if a drug or drug-like program were at work.

The deserted space behind a building.

Cables radiated from an enormous hub mounted on a wall. It looked like the center of a spider's nest. It was unclear whether they were viewing the image from above or below.

<Where are we now?> Kusanagi asked Ishikawa.

<I can't determine the exact site. We're probably at one of the Net infrastructure relay points in the cyberbrain district, but there are a lot of locations that look like this.>

Someone was standing in front of the image of the hub.

The person was veiled by a field of concentrated static, as if to deliberately conceal him- or herself.

Kusanagi concentrated the focus of the reconstruction on the person. The static cleared up and the figure came into clear view. It was a teenager.

<A girl right around Shikawa's age. No, wait—it's a boy.>

The boy was androgynous, with delicate features. He seemed to be smiling at them.

The boy reached out his arm. He was holding a gun.

It was a Smith and Wesson Chief Special—the same model Shikawa had used.

He proffered the gun with the grip towards them. This wasn't an attack—he was giving Shikawa the gun.

Shikawa took it.

Through the information she was receiving, Kusanagi could feel the weight and texture of the gun in her right hand.

Darkness.

The image had blacked out.

"Did you find something?"

Ishikawa was looking at Kusanagi.

"Ishikawa, get me info on that boy in the image I reconstructed. He was a minor. The quickest way'll be to search the MHLW records."

"Roger."

Ishikawa dived into the Net. A submonitor displayed his search process.

In principle, every person living in Japan was registered in the healthcare Net of the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare. Nowadays, however, there were an increasing number of unregistered children due to illegal immigration. If that was one such case, they'd have to do more legwork. But from the memory they'd seen, the boy looked like a kid from an ordinary lower- or middle-class home.

The submonitor showed a search based on the boy's facial information. Since adolescents grow quickly, Ishikawa broadened

the search to allow for a degree of change in the boy's features. Eye position, nose position, eye color, nose and lip shape, jaw line—item by item, the search narrowed its parameters.

"Got it." Ishikawa released the dive terminal.

The boy's face appeared on the submonitor.

His face was younger—his registration must have been out of date. But it was unquestionably the same face as that of the boy in the memory.

"Can we see some data?"

"I'll pull it up on the monitor." A stream of text appeared on the screen.

Name: Satoru Sakami. Date of birth: June 3, 2014. Date of death: October 22, 2024.

"Death?" Kusanagi asked Ishikawa.

"Yeah, he's dead. Died in a plane crash. Remember when that commuter plane from Sapporo to Niihama crashed during a typhoon? He was one of the victims."

"As I recall, JNA flight 123 was carrying 176 passengers. They lost contact with it during the storm," Kusanagi reflected. "Sixty minutes later, an SDF search plane found the pieces awash in the Sea of Japan."

"The accident was attributed to a mechanical problem, but the airline claimed it was a natural disaster and refused to admit any failure on the part of the pilot or the plane," Shikawa recalled. "They never reached a consensus with the victim's families regarding compensation."

"Then who was that boy Shikawa saw?"

"Maybe it was a ghost," Ishikawa shrugged.

"Please review the records of the accident. Find out if there's any possibility that he washed up on shore or wasn't on the plane and could still be alive." Kusanagi turned on her heels and headed out of the computer room.

"I can do that—but where're you going?" Ishikawa called after her.

"The Niihama Cyberbrain District. There's something there, right?"

Chapter 5



A rancid smell met Kazei's nostrils.

He had been to the sub-levels of the Cyberbrain District a number of times, even before getting his cyberbrain, but he didn't think he'd ever get used to the stench.

Unshaven middle-aged men lay in the corners, their clothes shiny and black with grime. It was hard to tell if they were dead or alive. There weren't just one or two of them, either—they were everywhere. Not just on the streets, but under external air-conditioning units, fire escapes, and the cables that crawled on the surface of the buildings, all of which provided optimal shelter from the chill of the night. To them, the stench was the city's atmosphere.

The sun would set soon.

Kazei's breath was white.

In this city of skyscrapers, the sub-levels were like an architectural valley. The light was dim and the temperature was already dropping. The pavement was still wet from yesterday's

rain, causing the air to feel even chillier than usual. As the electric billboards and signs began to light up the tops of the buildings, the city floor grew darker still.

There was no vitality here—only chaos and the decrepitude of reality. That was why the people living here looked to the Net to seek hope.

And I'm one of them, Kazei thought.

He looked up from the narrow alley at the buildings above him. Multiple thin cables ran back and forth between the buildings. The buildings were all supposedly equipped with security systems, but cyberized refugees and drifters still managed to live in the fully automatic maintenance corridors. They were probably the ones splicing into the cables to access the Net.

The Net ruled the city. It was a system in which a person without a cyberbrain had no hope of leading a decent life. The shape of the brain waves emitted by a cyberbrain served as a sort of cybernetic brain fingerprint, and they were nicknamed "cyberprints" and even used to confirm their owners' identities. Most of the paper media that filled the city was printed in code, allowing much more information to be crammed onto one sheet than was possible with conventional text. To the unciberized, it was nothing but an indecipherable scrawl.

Perhaps everything in the world would one day be replaced by a value. Not just memories and events, but emotions and dreams, too.

"Where're we going?" Takegawa called. He'd followed Kazei, trailing after him.

"I don't know," Kazei answered without turning his head.

"Let's go to a Dreamery then! At times like this, a dream and a good sleep are just the thing."

"A dream, huh? I'm not really into that. They're too contrived or something."

"Yeah, well, they are pseudo-memories . . . You haven't ever had a Realie, right?"

"A Realie?"

"Yeah, you know . . . raw."

"But that's illegal!"

"Yeah . . ." Takegawa trotted to catch up to Kazei and put his arm around his shoulder. "I can't say this too loud . . . Most designer-created pseudo-memories are overacted and predictable. But Realies are as exciting as peeking into another person's memory. You should try it at least once."

"You're just saying that because you want to go," Kazei shot back.

Takegawa laughed. "It's all about experience, man. You just got cyberized. I just want you to experience some new things. Don't forget, I'm a year older than you."

"Yeah, but we're in the same grade."

"C'mon, trust me. Let's go!"

He strode off without waiting for Kazei to answer. Kazei didn't object.

Takegawa headed down a different road from their usual path. Kazei followed silently. Eventually, they arrived in a part of the city that had been overlooked during the rebuilding period and remained just as it had been left by the war.

This was the other face of the cyberbrain district—the slums

that inhabited its sub-levels. Inside, a complicated snarl of cables stretched above shanties occupied by the city's parasites.

Many of them were cyborg refugees who had escaped from the refugee camps where they'd received amnesty. There were also a large number of illegal immigrants. The police refrained from taking aggressive action out of concern for their own safety, and the zone was a haven for illegal businesses and their clientele. Shoppers could download cyberbrain software that violated the Cyberbrain Decency Act through a direct connection without utilizing the Net.

Kazei had never been here before.

Overwhelmed by his surroundings, he stopped inadvertently in his tracks.

The makeshift shops lining both sides of the narrow road displayed all manner of cyberbrain plugs and connectors, both old and new. Some of them were like nothing Kazei had ever seen before. In other shops, prosthetic arms and legs for outfitting cyborgs hung right from the eaves, imbuing the place with a strange atmosphere.

The skyscrapers towering above them were the walls of this valley.

The night sky was nothing but a black line overhead.

It seemed very far away.

This was the very pit of the earth.

The lights from the upper levels didn't even reach here.

In an effort to siphon off just a bit of that light, the Network infrastructure cables that served as the lifelines of the city were

illegally spliced, with thin cables running into each of the shanties. The crisscrossing web formed a ceiling above them.

Takegawa thumped his frozen friend on the shoulder and beckoned to Kazei to keep following him.

The road came to an end at a wall covered with a tangle of cables. It looked like an enormous spider web spun on the building's surface. It was almost like the brain shell of the city—where all the cables that functioned as the city's nerves came together.

"This is it," Takegawa said.

Kazei looked at the shanty Takegawa was indicating. Scrap steel bound together to form pillars supported a heavy sheet-iron roof. An electric supply cable as thick as a child's torso ran into the shanty through its roof. Next to the structure stood a machine the size of a refrigerator, its purpose unclear.

"This is the place?"

"The fact that it isn't obvious is the whole point. If you're selling illegal Realies, you can't just write 'Realies Sold Here' in big letters on the wall."

"That makes sense."

"A picture's worth a thousand words. It looks better from the inside." Takegawa gave Kazei's back a push, herding him in through the outward opening door.

But inside the shanty there was nothing but a shabby chair, a small table, a tall locker that extended to the ceiling, and a bed sunken with the imprint of a human form near the center of the room. A timeworn memory box languished on the table.

"Hey . . ." Kazei was about to complain that this didn't look better at all, but Takegawa interrupted him.

"Just trust me, okay?"

With that, he opened the locker with breezy familiarity, pulled out a blindfold, and tied it on Kazei.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

Kazei tried to pull the blindfold off, but Takegawa stopped him.

"This place is highly secretive. This is just a little magic trick. I'll be wearing one, too."

"Magic?"

"There's nothing to worry about," an unfamiliar man's voice cut in. "There are times when it's better to know as little as possible for the safety of everyone involved. Know what I mean?"

Kazei didn't, but he nodded anyway. It made him uneasy to be blindfolded without his consent.

Without warning, a thick hand grasped Kazei's arm with overpowering force. "Right this way," the voice said.

Kazei walked falteringly in the direction the hand was pulling him.

He was enveloped by a blast of cold air. A door slammed shut behind him.

Alarmed, he reached out a hand. His fingers touched something cold, like concrete.

They continued to walk—how far, he didn't know. There were no stairs or inclines, just a continuous flat path.

How large was this shanty, anyway?

"You can remove the blindfold now," the man's voice cut into his thoughts.

The first thing Kazei saw was a collection of state-of-the-art cyberbrain devices lining the wall. The big one with all of the wires coming out of it was probably a server. The cables radiating out of it were connected to five beds lined up in the center of the room, filling the space. The room was kept very cold—the air conditioning seemed stronger than necessary.

"This is your first time, isn't it?"

Kazei looked down towards the source of the voice. It was a tiny man who only came up to Kazei's hip. His body was obviously cybernetic, with mechanical parts sticking out here and there.

The man was glaring up at him.

"He's my friend," Takegawa explained to the dwarf. At this, the little man's expression softened.

"He's with you, eh? He isn't wired to any funny threads, is he?"

"Course not. I don't have anything to do with those types. I come here, don't I?"

"True."

The man looked at Kazei and leered. "This is your first Realie, right? When you try it, you'll be hooked. You don't just get the visual and audio information like with those so-called products on the regular market. You get a complete re-created tactile, taste, and olfactory experience. The fidelity is incomparable, and some of our hardcore customers cut the visual and audio and just savor the tactile, olfactory, and taste. To some

extent we can cater to your preferences, but what makes a Realie special is that you don't necessarily get exactly what you want. Lie down here."

The dwarf pushed Kazei down onto one of the beds. With hurried movements, he withdrew a cable from the memory box installed under the bed and attempted to plug it into the back of Kazei's head.

"Oh, you've got a QRS plug—the latest model. You only cyberized fairly recently, I take it?"

"Fairly recently isn't the word. He's fresh out of the shop. Hasn't even been two weeks," Takegawa answered on Kazei's behalf.

Kazei decided to keep quiet and let Takegawa do the talking.

Soon Takegawa and the tiny shopkeeper were deep in conversation in front of the server. Kazei couldn't have cared less. They were probably just picking out a dream to show him. Judging from Takegawa's personality, Kazei doubted it would be anything decent. That was fine with him.

Kazei had already experienced the regular pseudo-memories available on the market a number of times. He'd tried the first one out of curiosity when he was sixteen. He'd sampled X-rated ones, too, but he hadn't really liked them. He was never able to really develop a taste for Dreams—it made him uncomfortable to have everything happen exactly as he wanted.

"We're ready!" Takegawa called out to him.

"What are you going to show me?"

"The ultimate Realie. A very special item I've handpicked just for you."

He held out a cable connector to Kazei. Kazei took it and plugged it into the port at the back of his neck. A signal indicated that his cyberbrain had been connected to an external memory device as the compressed information began to flow into his cyberbrain.

"When you've finished pulling down the memory just put this on and go to sleep. It'll wash in a patch that adapts the memory to your cyberbrain." Takegawa handed Kazei the headgear that was hanging by the pillow end of his bed. It was a helmet-shaped thing that went over his whole head, covering his eyes. This was an auxiliary device meant to induce sleep and regulate the frequency and voltage of his cyberbrain. They used them at regular Dreameries, too. Kazei didn't like the sensation it gave him—like a hand was stroking the inside of his head.

He donned the headgear, and blackness smothered his vision. At the same time, a fog completely enveloped the back of his head and he felt his five senses grow keener. That would be the sleep-inducing program. It purposefully engendered an REM sleep, just light enough to be suited to dreaming. It had to be a comfortable sleep, too.

His brain was definitely active now. Only his body was at rest. This must be something like the state that had once been referred to as "goldbound" in Japan, when your body fell asleep but your brain remained awake.

Darkness.

Then, suddenly, an image appeared.

It was a park in the daytime.

He was looking up at the sky.

Next, a green lawn leapt into view. Everything else was black and white.

A woman lay in front of him on the grass. She was probably pushing thirty. She wore a white button-down shirt. It was open at the top to reveal her generous, round breasts. They jiggled as she moved.

A deep slit ran up her tight black skirt, which set her gleaming white thighs in sharp contrast.

The woman smoothed back her hair and beckoned to him.

Through no intention of his own, Kazei felt himself move toward the woman and bury his head in her breasts.

He felt her wrap her arms around his head.

He could smell the sweet fragrance of her body.

The memory skipped. This happened often when memories were replayed.

The same woman was now sprawled wantonly across a bed. Her sweaty skin glistened in the soft light. The swells of her body cast deep shadows.

Kazei could feel the heat of her body against his chest, arms, and legs. He felt her grab him, and his heart raced.

The memory skipped again.

A roaring sound filled his ears.

He didn't actually hear it—Kazei could sense that this was the memory of an auditory experience.

He couldn't see anything.

It was dark.

He was struck by an intense heat.

It was sweltering.

What was this?

He was frightened.

He heard a voice. "We're going down!" it shouted.

What was this dream? The memory of some masochistic experience?

Suddenly, a multitude of screaming voices filled his ears.

He wanted to find out what was going on, but all he could see were his own feet.

A crisp blast resounded to his right side.

His view panned in its direction. The woman sitting in the next seat was looking his way. Her eyes were unfocused.

Mother.

The woman was the mother of the person whose memory this was.

A black hole opened in the woman's forehead and blood began to spew forth. What had been his mother a moment earlier was now a corpse.

What the hell is this?

Kazei couldn't comprehend the situation. He had no idea what was going on.

Suddenly, a white light enveloped him.

He thought he saw something.

Intense heat. His flesh was burning. The sensation reached his brain.

"...!"

Kazei screamed, but no sound came out. In a single motion, he ripped the headgear off and jolted upright. The cable connected to

the back of his neck was pulled loose. He gasped for breath, his shoulders heaving. The sound of his breath echoed through the room and began to reach his ears.

Finally, Kazei began to comprehend what was happening, and he was able to clear his head and see what he was doing. Perspiration ran down his face from his forehead, dripping off his chin. One by one, the drops were absorbed by the fabric of his clothing.

His whole body was bathed in an oily sweat.

"What's up? Was it that good?"

Kazei slowly raised his eyes to the sight of Takegawa's face peering down at him.

"I used the same one the other day. Leaves quite an afterglow, doesn't it? When you get back to the dorm, you'll probably dream it again. That's the awesome thing about Realies—it's like you're actually experiencing another person's memory yourself."

"What the hell was that?"

"What the hell was what?"

As he tried to explain, Kazei's recollection of the dream began to melt away. He clung to the threads of the memory, trying desperately to weave them back into a sense of something that was now almost gone. What had it been? Yes—

"Who was that guy?"

"What guy?"

"The guy in the dream. Around our age. I don't know what he looked like, but—he was someone I know."

"Are you sure? If you did see some guy, your memory must have been confused or something."

"Huh?"

"The dream I chose you was "Private Lesson with Foxy Teacher," about a teacher giving a guy our age a complete education in you-know-what. I guess the guy in the dream just happened to be someone you knew or something."

"You think so?"

"Sure. But he's the one having the memory, so you shouldn't have seen him. Maybe it was contaminated."

Takegawa looked at the dwarf.

"Not a chance!" the little man shouted angrily. "I'll stake my reputation on it. No contaminated dreams here. Nobody's used that one since the last time you were here! And every time that memory box is reused, I reformat it and wipe it completely clean. There's no garbage in there. The garbage is in this kid's head!"

Kazei was too drained to answer.

Had it just been memory-information garbage left over in his cyberbrain? Such garbage took the form of fragments that eventually degenerated and sank into an ocean of oblivion.

Could garbage be that vivid?

Kazei was struck by a feeling that he himself couldn't comprehend. From the moment he'd experienced the dream, it was as if his entire cyberbrain was shrouded in something. Was this a function of the dream, too?

What the hell was that? Kazei asked himself.

Chapter 6



It had already been two hours since the car had pulled into the parking lot of the Newport City Hotel. There was no sign of the driver's return. It was a shiny black luxury sedan.

"That car looks more comfortable," Togusa griped from the passenger seat of a Lancia Stratos parked just a little ways off.

"You want to go sit in there instead?" Batou suggested from the driver's seat, his chin and hands rested on the steering wheel as he stared out the front windshield with rapt attention.

"Nah. Soft seats are no good for a stakeout. You get too sleepy. Hard, cramped seats are really just the thing." Togusa thumped the Recaro bucket seats in the Lancia's cockpit.

"Nothing's deluxe enough for you ex-cops, is it?" Batou muttered, looking Togusa's way.

"Oh, and you ex-military types are so easy to please—carrying your own customized gun because the standard-issue ones aren't good enough for you!"

"Ha! You're one to talk, with that antique curio you pack!"

"It does the job."

"Think of how I feel, with only six bullets to cover my back!"

"You want to cover my back instead?"

"Ask me again in ten years, rookie."

Nearly all of Public Safety Section 9's members had military experience. The fact that Togusa was a former police detective made him unique.

Batou recalled Kusanagi saying that she'd recruited Togusa in order to prevent Section 9 from becoming too set in its ways. From Batou's point of view, Togusa was an unreliable rookie. But he figured Togusa must have something that he himself lacked, and that that was why they'd been assigned to this dangerous job together. Batou opened an interface in his cyberbrain and reviewed the assignment's dossier.

Section 9 had acquired information that the Red Sands, the international drug ring that was plotting the assassination of Osmal Najif, was purchasing weapons through the Sadoyama Group—the ringleaders of the domestic black market.

Batou and Togusa were there to monitor the activities of Masatsugu Sadoyama, the leader of the Sadoyama Group, twenty-four hours a day. Their assignment was to acquire detailed information about the weapons that were being sold to the Red Sands.

According to their lead, all of the arrangements had already been made for the Sadoyama Group to supply the assassination weapons to the Red Sands. They anticipated that the

arsenal would change hands within the next few days. The most efficient way to head off the assault would be to sever the supply line between the two groups. In order to do that, they would have to arrest Sadoyama.

<Sadoyama is taking the elevator from the lobby down to the underground parking area. He has two bodyguards.> The transmission came from Paz, who was on watch in the hotel lobby.

Batou eyed the elevators through the rearview mirror. The light on the elevator's floor indicator above the doors moved from L to 6B and stopped.

The elevator door opened.

"Here he comes!" Togusa said, looking back and reaching for the door handle.

"Not yet," Batou stopped him.

Through the rear-view mirror, he could see Sadoyama getting off the elevator that connected the lobby to the parking lot, roughly fifteen meters behind them. He was flanked by two bodyguards who were eyeing the surroundings like hawks. One was a giant, more than two meters tall. The other one was built like a beer keg. Both were wearing black suits.

Probably high-powered cyborgs with illegal modifications. A malevolent grin stretched across Batou's face.

"No need to pull our punches," he remarked, strapping on his stun knuckles. Now his fists would instantly deliver a four-hundred-thousand-volt, ultrahigh-pressure electric shock. This close-combat weapon could do major damage to an ordinary flesh-and-blood person, let alone a cyborg who depended on electric signals to control his prosthetic body.

Batou cranked the voltage dial all the way up.

"You take Mr. Beer Barrel on the right. I'll handle the giant and Sadoyama."

"You sure you don't want me to handle them both?"

"Don't get cocky, rookie." Batou sprang out of the Lancia just as the three men went behind a pillar, obscuring their line of vision.

"I'm not a rookie, damn it!" Togusa said, strapping on his knuckles and following suit.

In a flash, Batou had closed in on Sadoyama.

The giant saw him.

The tricked-out battle cyborg sent a deadly fist flying in Batou's direction.

Batou dodged it, but just barely. The wind from the punch knocked him backwards. Without adjusting his stance, Batou threw a counterpunch, smashing the full-voltage stun knuckles into the man's stomach.

The impact made a loud thud and the man's body was launched into the air. His back emitted a shower of blue-white sparks.

The man fell forward in Batou's direction. Batou leapt out of the way, and the man smashed face-first onto the concrete floor.

White smoke rose up from his motionless body.

Batou spun towards Sadoyama just in time to see him thrust his hand into his jacket pocket.

Instantly, Batou ducked.

A bullet pierced the air where Batou's head had just been, boring a hole into the concrete pillar behind him.

Still crouching, Batou did a forward roll toward Sadoyama.

Pivoting backward onto his arms, he delivered a savage kick to Sadoyama's gun arm from underneath.

"Aaugh!"

With a nauseating crunch, Sadoyama's arm folded in half. He swung his good arm at Batou's head. His fingers opened to reveal a connective-type blasting cap. Batou twisted his body to avoid the blow.

Sadoyama's hand hit the concrete floor. KA-BLAM! The explosion left a large cavity in the floor. Sadoyama's hand was gone, too.

Swiftly, Batou swung behind Sadoyama and pulled his FN Highpower out of his holster, jabbing it into Sadoyama's back.

"You could have hurt somebody!" Batou chided as he jabbed a cyberbrain lock into the plug in Sadoyama's neck.

"ARG!"

The sound of Togusa's voice made Batou turn around. Togusa was deep in combat with the barrel-chested cyborg.

"What's going on here?" Batou called.

Togusa was in no state to answer. He was in the midst of a fierce brawl with his opponent.

One of Togusa's blows landed, and the cyborg's body gave off a bluish light.

Unperturbed, Beer Barrel swung at Togusa with his right arm.

Togusa dodged it by a hair.

A gash opened in his cheek, and a trickle of blood ran down his chin and began to drip, leaving red stains on the concrete.

That was when he saw it—the tip of a sharp blade peeking out of the bodyguard's hand. He was packing some kind of hidden weapon.

Despite the cyborg's boorish appearance, his every move was extremely well-calculated.

"So, this one's the humdinger, eh?" Batou muttered.

Beer Barrel launched his right fist at Togusa again.

Togusa ducked, avoiding the dagger, but the cyborg's stubby leg shot out and swept Togusa's feet out from under him. He went over, landing on his back with a grunt as the wind was knocked out of him.

His face contorted in pain, Togusa looked up to see the bodyguard smirking down at him.

In a deft movement, Togusa pulled the Mateba M2008 out from his hip holster. But Beer Barrel was too fast for him. Just when Togusa had pointed the gun and was about to shoot, his opponent kicked his hand and the Mateba went sliding across the floor.

Beer Barrel raised his dagger in the air. Togusa stopped cold, shock freezing him in his tracks.

There was no escape. Togusa shut his eyes in resignation. The image of his wife and child at home flashed into his mind.

At that instant, a dry shot rang out through the parking garage, dispelling his thoughts.

He looked up. Beer Barrel's head was gone.

The cyborg crashed to the ground and was still.

Togusa looked at Batou. A bluish smoke was rising up from his FN Highpower.

"You owe me one." Batou put the gun back in its holster and offered Togusa his hand. Togusa knocked it away and pulled himself to his feet, scowling.

Batou shrugged. As Togusa retrieved his Mateba from the floor, Batou called out to him. "I guess you got the tough one."

"Yeah," Togusa responded flatly.

"You look like you've seen the Angel of Death."

"I saw the faces of my wife and child."

"That's why it's rough to be a family man."

"Sometimes having them gives me strength. But at times like this . . ."

"There's gonna be a lot more times like this. Let's bring Sadoyama in to Section 9. Take your mind off of it."

Batou sent a cybercomm to headquarters.

<Batou here. Subject is in custody. Bring the car around.>

<Roger. Be there in two minutes,> replied Saito, a Section 9 team member who had been patrolling the vicinity of the hotel.

Batou circled Sadoyama's luxury sedan guardedly. He got down on all fours and peered under the car, then crawled underneath.

"Hey, Big Guy. Don't you think it'd be faster if we just take this car back to Section 9?" Togusa proposed.

"That would be nice," Batou called back from underneath the car. "But we can't be too cautious with this kind of job."

"Cautious, huh. I guess if you call kidnapping a beeper cautious."

"Well, sometimes we have no choice but to be boldly cautious, you know . . . here, look."

Batou crawled out from under the car and placed something in Togusa's hand.

It was a miniature transmitter.

"It was well hidden, too. They've probably got other ones in there that we couldn't find without taking the whole thing apart. I've got other plans for this car."

"Other plans?"

Just then, a utility van with the words "Seishin Kouki" across the back skidded into sight. It pulled up next to the two men.

Saito looked out at them from the driver's seat. He had a black eye patch over one eye, a shaved head, and a stern countenance. There was no mistaking his line of work.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Not at all. A minute and forty-seven seconds. That's pretty good time."

Both rear doors slid open. A huge, bald man with eye lenses like Batou's emerged, accompanied by a man of medium height and build with shifty-looking, slanted eyes. The giant was Borma, the slanty-eyed one was Paz.

Saito, Borma, and Paz were all members of Section 9. The minute Borma was out of the van, he walked over to the downed giant cyborg and the headless Beer Barrel. One by one, he grabbed them by the waist with both hands and dragged them across the floor toward the luxury sedan.

Saito relieved Batou of Sadoyama and loaded him into the back of the van.

"Full of transmitters, just as we suspected," Batou told Paz, eyeing the sedan.

"Say no more." Borma inserted a connector into the keyhole of the sedan, unlocking it with a click. He opened the rear door and heaved Beer Barrel and the giant into the back seat.

"When we're done with the car and the two guards we'll dispose of them," Borma said. He and Paz climbed into the sedan and drove off.

"Guess we should get back to Section 9 and do some work," Batou said, closing the back door of the van with Sadoyama inside.

Chapter 7



It was business as usual at the electronics superstore in the cyber-brain district where the hostage incident had taken place—almost as if the events of three days ago had never happened.

The only reminder was the divot the rifle shot had left in the floor, which had simply been sealed with a thin plug of wood. The area around it was still marked with reflective masking tape, the edges of which were already peeling and dirty from the many customers who had trodden over it.

Whenever a crime took place, it began to become a thing of the past as soon as the moment was over. For those who hadn't witnessed the event in real time, the follow-up coverage in the media was nothing but a story. The moment it was ended, it began to fade from people's memories.

Naturally, the same was true of this incident.

As she gazed at the scene, Kusanagi mentally reviewed Shikawa's behavior up until the time of his crime.

The first question was his motive.

To the best of her knowledge, Hisamitsu Shikawa hadn't come from a troubled home. He was just a typical introverted Net geek. They were everywhere these days.

His only illicit behavior had been the consumption of adult entertainment that utilized illegal programs. It was the kind of thing that might merit a warning or a slap on the wrist, but Kusanagi had never heard of someone being arrested for that sort of offense.

She'd examined his log, but there was no evidence of his gathering information on how to build a C4 bomb and commit an indiscriminate act of terror. Nor did there seem to be any members of subversive student movements in his immediate environment.

After the war had ended, a number of hard-line policies had been implemented, and on each occasion they'd elicited iconoclastic backlash and rioting throughout the country. These movements had a strong influence on impressionable teenagers who were struggling to make sense of their lives. There was a certain thrill inherent in declaring war on the establishment—the feeling of waging destruction was inexplicably cool. Perhaps the act of rebelling against something made their lives feel meaningful.

That was Kusanagi's best guess, anyway. But she had no way of relating through personal experience.

Kusanagi hadn't had a normal adolescence. Ever since her entire body had been replaced by prosthetics at the age of six, her life had been bound by unique restrictions.

She'd had more immediate problems to worry about than lack of control over her environment as she struggled to gain mastery over an artificial body that sometimes refused to obey her commands. Forced to cyberize even her brain, the center of her thoughts, Kusanagi's entire person became an impediment that had to be conquered. She'd grappled with it every single day.

She couldn't fathom what it might be like to be born and grow up in circumstances in which no struggle was necessary, to feel compelled to seek out adversity during adolescence in order to uncover a sense of self. However, she did relate somehow to the seemingly naïve urge to devote oneself almost artlessly to one's convictions.

Maybe because Section 9 itself shared that quality.

But the only common thread connecting the teenagers in question was the public school system. It might be wise to comb through the curriculum one more time . . .

No matter how she looked at it, there just weren't enough clues. Right now, all she really had was the teenaged boy that had appeared in that memory fragment.

"Who are you?" Kusanagi found herself asking aloud.

<Hey, Major. Your brain waves feel a little melancholy.> The sudden transmission startled her.

<Hello, Batou. What do you want?>

<I've got Mr. Sadoyama of the Sadoyama Group here. He said something strange that I thought you should know about.>

<Strange?>

<The black market goods handled by the Sadoyama Group mainly

flow in through the North and through continental Asia. Sounds like something interesting might have made its way into the country.>

<Oh?>

<It's the Soldier Training Device that was used during the war to indoctrinate the North's cyberbrain-equipped troops.>

<I've heard of that. An educational mechanism used to plant a unified mentality into the consciousness of each individual in order to create a perfectly cohesive unit. Sounds okay in theory, but when you get right down to it, it was really just a brainwashing device. They've imported one? >

<Exactly. It has the power to induce a person's complete devotion to a goal that they aren't even conscious of. It's been kept under wraps since it isn't a terribly ethical device.>

Kusanagi began to connect the dots.

<Batou, where's this device being sold?>

<Komatsu.>

<Komatsu?>

<You know, the place with the SDF air base. According to Sadoyama, this is the weapon the Red Sands were trying to acquire.>

<Is that all?>

<That's it, unless Sadoyama's memory is lying.>

<A brainwashing device, huh? Were they planning to brainwash Najif?>

<Don't ask me. Togusa and I are flying out to Komatsu to find out. There's always the chance that the Red Sands might resort to drastic measures if they find out that we have Sadoyama. They may have access to other weapons. But for now, we're going to nail this one. What do you say, is this information useful to you?>

<Not bad. I didn't realize you were so considerate.>

<I'm nothing if not considerate. Later.>

After Batou had closed the conversation, Kusanagi initiated one with Ishikawa.

<Ishikawa. Kusanagi speaking. Do you know anything about this Northern brainwashing device?>

<Heard about it from Batou. I'm putting together a file on it right now. It's a pretty old-fashioned gadget. It's designed to embed a codified objective in the subject's memory field. A sensory impetus triggers the command, which is then automatically carried out by the subject regardless of their own will.>

<Can you crack the code pattern?>

<It shouldn't be too hard—I'd just have pull down an old key code from the period. It may take a bit of time, but I'll give it a whirl.>

He signed off.

Kusanagi left the electronics superstore and began to walk slowly down the central avenue of the cyberbrain district. She mulled over this new development as she walked. Her footsteps fell into a steady rhythm, drowning out the noise of the city.

There was no doubt that the person who had obtained the brainwashing device in Komatsu was the key to the Good Morning Terrorism attacks. But the incidents had been scattered over a wide geographical plane, with three in the Kyushu area including Hakata, six in Niihama and the surrounding areas, and four more in various other regions.

There was always the possibility that the perpetrator was continually changing location in order to prevent his base from being discovered, but that explanation didn't really wash. If he

was trying to conceal his base of operations, he really should have been changing locations more frequently. Besides, what was the ultimate goal of the attacks?

No groups with terrorist tendencies had publicly advocated the incidents.

At present, the only event that constituted a possible target by a terrorist attack was the Micromachine Environmental Summit that was to be held in Hakata.

But these attacks had begun three years ago. And each time, both the targets and the terrorists' demands were different. Moreover, there was no lateral connection between the boys who had committed the attacks.

Perhaps they were all copycats, as in the case of the Laughing Man crimes. But there hadn't been an initial Good Morning Terrorism attack that might serve as that sort of model.

The only thing the attacks had in common was the fact that the boys all exhibited partial memory fragmentation after the attacks.

Was it a virus someone had released into the Net just for the fun of it? But judging from what they knew about the Red Sands, the possibility of a viral infection seemed faint.

There was something different about these crimes. Kusanagi could feel it.

When she reached the arcade at the front entrance to the Niihama Cyberbrain District, Kusanagi stopped in her tracks.

There were two boys coming down the street toward her. One walked with his arm across the other's shoulder, leaning on it for support. She'd seen his face before.

He seemed to recognize her, too.

"Yō Kazei of the Niihama Ground SDF Cadet School. What are you doing here? "

Kazei froze. "N-nothing."

"You look pale."

"It's nothing."

Kusanagi sensed something odd about the boy's manner.

"Who's the lady?" Kazei's friend asked him.

"She's the policewoman who came around asking about Shikawa."

"Oh, you're the policewoman," the other boy said. "Well, listen, lady, we haven't done anything wrong."

"Who are you?" Kusanagi demanded.

"Name's Takegawa. I'm Kazei's pal."

What a nervy kid, Kusanagi thought.

Just to make sure, she pulled down the student roster of the Niihama Ground SDF Cadet School from the Net.

Tomoharu Takegawa. Age seventeen. Held back one year.

He was a year older than Kazei and Shikawa, but he'd had to repeat a grade due to insufficient attendance and was reported as having behavior problems. He was in the same class as Kazei, and he lived in the adjacent dorm room.

He probably hadn't associated with Shikawa. Kusanagi got the impression that the two boys were a completely different type from Shikawa. But from the mere fact that they were the same age, it was possible that they had some things in common.

"Do you come to this part of town often?" she asked them.

Just as she'd expected, Takegawa was the one to answer.

"No, ma'am. We're just good little students. Of course, we do go to engineering school, so I'd be lying if I said that we were completely uninterested in the cyberbrain district. When we come here for fun, we mostly go to Net Game and Net Chat places. And to Dreameries."

"Dreameries, huh? The software that allows you to experience pseudo-memories? I know they were popular for a while, but I thought that that was over."

"They're more fun than Net Movies. There're still plenty of Dreameries in the cyberbrain district."

"Takegawa," Kazei said and began to walk away. He lost his footing, tripped, and fell to the ground. "Shit!"

"Take it easy, man. You're still Dreamsick."

Takegawa offered Kazei his shoulder again. Turning his head, he called back to Kusanagi. "See ya, miss police lady. If fate ever brings us together again, I hope it's just the two of us next time!"

When the boys were gone, Kusanagi began to look up the various Dreameries in the cyberbrain district. If Takegawa was right about the students at the cadet school gravitating towards certain tastes and interests, they might give her a lead as to Shikawa's habits. Kusanagi and other adults might consider Dreameries passé, but to today's teenagers perhaps they were a fresh form of entertainment.

"Maybe I'll map out the search area vertically," she murmured to herself and she began to walk deeper into the cyberbrain district.

Chapter 8



"You've been acting really weird, man. What's up?" Takegawa asked Kazei as he climbed over the fence. Kazei waited on the outside.

It was well past the Niihama Ground SDF Cadet School's curfew. They were late because Kazei had felt sick after his experience at the Dreamery and had needed to stop and rest.

"Here." From atop the fence, Takegawa extended a hand down to Kazei. Kazei grasped it and Takegawa hauled him up with ease. "You're light as a feather!"

As soon as he was over the fence, Kazei shoved away Takegawa's hand.

"What was that for?"

"Leave me alone," Kazei said, turning his back and walking away.

"Wait! Don't go that way . . ."

"Why not?"

Just as Kazei turned his head back toward Takegawa, a voice apprehended him from behind.

"Yō Kazei, *ahem*! I thought it was you."

It was the housemaster of their dormitory.

"I always knew you were up to no good, *ahem*! I suppose it was your rotten influence, *ahem*, that drove Shikawa to such extremes?"

Me!? Kazei glared back at the housemaster.

"Don't you look at me like that, *ahem*, you little punk! This is the only school open to a delinquent like you, *ahem*! If you weren't here, you'd either be living on the streets or you'd get picked up, *ahem*, and incarcerated at some juvenile reform facility, *ahem*. You know that, don't you?"

The inside of Kazei's brain went white.

He thought he heard Takegawa's voice somewhere off in the distance.

His fist was burning.

The next thing he knew, the housemaster was splayed out flat on the ground. A stream of blood trickled out of his nose and across his sunken cheek, forming a growing dark pool on the ground.

Takegawa approached the fallen housemaster, crouched over him, and peered into his face. "Shit! You've done it now."

He looked up at Kazei's face.

"Can't really blame you—he had it coming. At least we're on school grounds. If you just leave him here I'm sure he won't die or anything."

It finally dawned on Kazei what he'd done.

A hand clasped his shoulder.

Without thinking, he shoved it away. Takegawa's expression turned to one of surprise. "Hey, what's the deal, man? I'm just worried about you!"

"Leave me alone!"

"What the hell's the matter with you? Think about your situation! You punched out the housemaster! At the very best you'll get suspended, at worst you could get expelled. You don't have anywhere else to go, do you? You should go in and apologize tomorrow and try to get off with just a suspension—"

"You don't understand shit!" Kazei cut him off viciously and walked away, leaving Takegawa and the unconscious housemaster behind.

When he got back to his room, Kazei flopped down on his bed without turning on the lights and stared up at the ceiling.

Shit.

He had no idea why he was so angry.

Was it just the Dreamsickness making him irritable?

Was it Takegawa's presumptuous familiarity?

Was it the high-and-mighty attitude of the housemaster?

Was it the encounter with that policewoman in the cyber-brain district?

Takegawa's body writhed with churning rage.

He wished he could disappear.

All of the visual information his eyes picked up irked him.

So did all of the auditory information that came in through his ears.

Smell, taste, touch—he didn't want to experience any of them if he could help it.

He closed his eyes.

He covered his ears.

He held his breath.

He worked his cyberbrain, knowing that there was a function to turn off his sensory perceptions. He'd never tried it before, and he'd been warned by the doctor when he'd been cyberized that it could cause a person's vital functions to break down, even if your body was prosthetic but especially if it was flesh and blood.

Now, Kazei tried deliberately to do just that. Even if he couldn't turn his senses off completely, if he could just dull them to a minimum . . .

He wished he could turn off his heart.

In his cyberbrain, Kazei imagined he was turning down a volume knob for his sensory organs.

Gradually, his organs grew numb. He felt as if his body were sinking down into something very deep. He sank and sank.

It was just like plunging down into the depths of the ocean. That was how he felt. Not that Kazei had ever done that, but somehow he was sure that this was what it would be like.

He began to feel afraid that he would never be able to come back up. He stopped lowering the volume.

Now the image that came into his mind was that of the boy

from the dream.

Yes. It was him.

Kazei was sure of it.

The boy was holding out his hand to Kazei. It looked close enough to touch if Kazei just reached back.

The boy's world seemed dazzlingly bright. Kazei's eyes were already closed, but he tried to squeeze them shut even more, making his brow ache.

It's only a dream. Just an image in my memory—Kazei's rational mind was screaming.

But I want to go over there! Kazei's consciousness was screaming back.

Somewhere, Kazei had experienced this feeling before.

The feeling of something being so close but forever beyond reach.

Yes. It's like that time at school.

He'd been eight years old.

When he'd been diagnosed with cyberbrain maladaptivity in his cyberbrain examination, Kazei had been transferred from his regular class into a special education program.

He'd felt the once-friendly eyes of his classmates become menacing. When he'd tried to play with them after school, every single one of them had shut him out.

He was a reject.

His new classes were completely different, too.

The classroom itself had been similar, but the normal cyberbrain curriculum was heavily abridged. Instead, they were

taught how to use old-fashioned terminals and how to decipher cyberbrain language through text.

At first, he hadn't really understood what it meant to be Cyberbrain Maladaptive. But over the next few years his frame of reference grew to encompass society at large, beyond the school community, and he began to realize what a major handicap it was, even for a young boy.

His parents, relatives, and neighbors all got the same look on their faces as they expressed how sorry for him they felt.

Why did they feel sorry for him?

He could think, talk, run, jump, and laugh just like anybody else. But the people around him considered him pitiful, just because of this one disadvantage.

Plagued by the feeling that nobody understood him, Kazei began to spend more and more time alone.

One day, from the gloomy classroom of the Cyberbrain Maladaptives, Kazei heard the shouts of his former friends playing in the sun-filled schoolyard. He knew that there was another world out there, walled off to him by a single pane of window glass.

Kazei had screamed.

He'd picked up a chair and smashed a pane of glass.

Then another, and another, until he'd broken every window in the classroom.

The adults had come and held him down. He'd clung to the chair even when they'd wrestled him to the floor. He couldn't let go of the weapon he'd used to shatter the walls that imprisoned him.

He could see the schoolyard, so close and yet forever out of reach.

Perhaps the boy in his dream was the person who would lead him to eternity.

Kazei tried to replay the dream in his mind.

Heat.

Pain.

Confusion.

Mother.

Revolver.

And anger.

He was conscious of being immersed in all of these things. But he had no idea what they meant.

Takegawa had told him that Realies were genuine memories of something another person had experienced.

If so, then it had to have been an actual incident of some kind.

A memory of absolute desperation.

It was far too authentic to have been a pseudo-memory. The smells in the air, the trembling of his body, the death of his mother next to him—there was absolutely no way that these things could have been engineered for entertainment purposes. It had been too immediate. It had to be a record of something that had really taken place.

Takegawa had claimed that the dream he'd tried to show Kazei was just a memory of a real sex act. Since Takegawa had supposedly tried the same dream himself, Kazei had probably just narrowly escaped becoming brothers with Takegawa in the

worst way possible. Technically it would have been through a virtual real memory, but it still wasn't an idea that Kazei relished.

If Takegawa hadn't deliberately given him that dream, perhaps it had been the dwarf who ran the Dreamery.

But that was impossible.

There was no reason for him to pull something like that on Kazei. If it hadn't been the dwarf, then the memory had to have been recorded in the Realie itself.

Some people could see it and other people couldn't. In other words, the dream selected the person, rather than the person selecting the dream. Maybe the dream was trying to communicate something to the people who saw it.

Kazei yearned to find the answer the dream held. There was something he wanted very badly to know. As soon as this dawned on him, he felt a person appear in his mind.

It's the boy, he thought.

Kazei couldn't see him. He simply felt his presence. A feeling of something like nostalgia cut through his mind. A mysterious, somehow androgynous boy—even though he was invisible, Kazei could sense it.

Perhaps his memory information was just mixed up. But the boy's presence felt just as real as when he had seen the dream.

Kazei spoke. His voice didn't actually pierce the air—it was merely the mental concept of his voice. "What are you?"

Slowly, the boy pointed a finger toward Kazei. He didn't speak.

"You're me?"

There was no affirmation or denial. Kazei sensed no reaction at all.

"Am I you?"

Immediately, Kazei felt his mind float upwards toward a white light.

Kazei opened his eyes.

Takegawa's face was peering into his.

"He's awake!" Takegawa exclaimed and ran out of the room. Kazei could hear the patter of his footsteps in the hallway—it sounded like Takegawa was wearing slippers.

Kazei looked at the ceiling.

This wasn't the ceiling of his room. It was a different height.

He tried to look to the side, but he couldn't move his head. Something was immobilizing it. He tried to reach up to feel what it was, but he couldn't move his arms, either. His entire body felt as if it were bound up in chains. It was hard to breathe, too.

Everything felt heavy.

Had the force of gravity gotten three or four times stronger? The way Kazei was feeling, it seemed possible.

Before long, he heard the pattering of footsteps again. This time, there were several people, and the squeaky sound of something on wheels.

What a racket.

Shut up! Kazei tried to say, but the words didn't come out—only a voiceless sigh.

What the hell?

Just then, Takegawa's face appeared over his head again. His expression was gloomy and his face was pallid.

"I called the doctor," he said. His voice sounded distant.

A middle-aged man nudged Takegawa out of the way. His face was made of hard plastic and he looked like a praying mantis. The lens of a prosthetic eye peered out of his right eye socket. On the other side, Kazei could see the face of a female-type android. She wore a white hat with a red cross in the center.

Oh. This is a hospital.

Kazei finally realized where he was, but he still didn't know what was going on.

The mantis-faced doctor and the expressionless android nurse were busily pointing a cylindrical wand at Kazei's body. He'd seen a similar instrument before. It was the inductometer that they'd used to fix the micromachines in his brain when he'd been cyberized.

The mantis-faced doctor spoke for the first time. "Your cyber-brain activity has fallen to just forty percent, so we've had to inject micromachines into your body in order to encourage activation. Since your life was in danger when you were brought in, I elected to initiate treatments to stimulate your sensory organs without your consent, in accordance with the Cyberbrain Ethics Law. Because you're Cyberbrain Maladaptive with processing adaptivity levels close to the lowest end of the screening range, I'm recommending that function restrictions are placed on your cyberbrain usage in order to make sure that an accident like this

never happens again. I'm about to rebuild the links between your cyberbrain and your sensory organs. Blink once for Yes and twice for No."

My life was in danger?

Kazei was confused as to what danger the man was talking about. When he heard the doctor talk about stimulating his sensory organs, he realized for the first time that the vital functions of his body had been in critical condition. Perhaps he'd stayed under too long with his sensory organs cut off from his cyberbrain.

When a cyberbrain was installed in a natural human body with no prosthetic parts, and communication was lost for too long between the cyberbrain and sensory organs, a loss of frame synchronization could occur, ultimately disconnecting the cyberbrain from the physical body. With a prosthetic body, it was possible to release false signals that assumed the disconnection of the cyberbrain and its respective parts in order to maintain normalcy. Some cyborg laborers with specialized occupations even deliberately cut off their sensory organs in order to customize the condition of their bodies.

But Kazei wasn't a cyborg.

Kazei's body was pure flesh and blood, and yet he had issued a command to his cyberbrain that was only possible with a cybernetic body. This was tantamount to discarding his physical body. It meant death.

I . . . can't . . . die . . . yet.

The words finally took shape in Kazei's sluggish thoughts.

Slowly, he lowered his eyelids and then opened them again. The he looked fixedly at the mantis-faced doctor.

The doctor gave an order to the android nurse and began to stick long, thin needles into Kazei's head.

It didn't hurt. But the amount of light that came in through his eyeballs increased gradually until it was painfully bright. The acoustic vibrations that came in through his ears became more and more vibrant until they were deafening. The smells in the room grew so strong they choked him. The numbness began to leaves his tongue and limbs, and the blood in his capillaries stimulated his nerves, filling his body with stabbing pains.

As all of his nerves linked to his cyberbrain, Kazei's body began to function again. Then, for a brief moment, his body seemed to collapse. It was reacting to the stimulation.

The mantis-faced doctor told Kazei that he would need thirty-two hours of rest to recover and then he and the android nurse left the room.

Now it was just Kazei and Takegawa in the vast hospital room.

He was the only patient in a room large enough for six.

"Did you do it because you felt bad about punching the housemaster?"

Kazei didn't answer.

"The housemaster said he wouldn't report you. What with Shikawa's terrorist attack, if you got expelled the higher-ups might question his management abilities. I bet he was totally panicked when he heard you were half-dead in the hospital."

Takegawa sat on a round stool next to Kazei's bed.

"Why would you do something like this, man?"

"Something like what?"

"Shutting down your sensory organs. That's insane."

"No special reason . . ." Kazei said, closing his eyes.

Why had he decided to shut down his sensory organs? Part of it was the desire to escape reality. But that had only been the immediate reason—the reason he'd reached for the volume knob. After that, it had been because of the dream . . .

"I wanted to see the rest of the dream," Kazei mumbled.

Takegawa's eyes widened. "You mean the one from the Dreamery?"

"Yeah."

"It was just a regular, old, X-rated dream. We can see that stuff again any time we want!"

"Not that dream. I wanted to see the rest of the other dream I saw. I thought that if I could see that guy again . . . I would learn something."

"You know that makes no sense. A dream is just a tiny scrap of memory. Besides, it's someone else's memory. Even if you saw what happened next, you wouldn't get any answers from it. You and I both aren't the smartest guys around—if you go thinking too hard you'll just give yourself a fever. You're in here for the rest of today and tomorrow, anyway, so try to get some rest, okay?"

"Okay."

Visit time was over. After Takegawa left, Kazei felt the lone-

liness of the huge room coupled with the starkness of the hospital environment. Since his cyberbrain was being treated, he wasn't allowed Net access, either.

All he had was the passing time.

The ticking away of seconds.

He told himself that right now, time was what he needed.

Time to slowly wake up.

Chapter 9



In an alleyway off the main avenues of the cyberbrain district, there was a tiny shop that sold illegal software and cyberbrain augmentation devices for unauthorized improvements.

A dimly lit sign that read “Totsuka Connectors” stood out in the dusky shadows. Beneath it, the shop’s cart was laden with cyberbrain connective devices of all shapes and sizes with a sign that read “Trade-ins for the Newest Models Available.”

In fact, none of the devices on display looked likely to function according to their specifications—some had lost their outer protective coating, others showed signs of advanced corrosion or oxidation, and others were visibly rusted. Of course, none of them resembled the products on the shelves of the pristine shops of the main drag.

The surrounding shops were no bigger. Their unsavory nature was obvious from a glance at the shopkeepers’ faces. Some appeared to be asleep but were actually watching the passersby

like hawks. Like predators on the hunt, their piercing gazes were trained on the narrow alleyway.

They spotted a person. Their eyes gleamed as they tried to discern whether or not she was a promising customer. An instant later, their eyes registered disappointment and uncertainty. Some retreated to the back of their shops while others feigned sleep.

The customer in question was a regular of this district, but all of the shopkeepers avoided her, foreseeing that the potential damage they might incur was greater than the potential profit.

She was headed for Totsuka Connectors.

The other shopkeepers watched in relief as the hazard passed them by, snickering at the misfortune visiting their neighbor. Not a single one of them was sympathetic.

Masamitsu Totsuka, the owner of Totsuka Connectors, tumbled off of his folding chair when he saw the woman come into his shop, his face still hidden behind the collar of his faded, tattered jacket.

"No need to act so startled. How long has it been—two months?" she greeted him.

"Three months. I just didn't expect that the Public Safety lady would have business with me again so soon. Well, what can I do for you today?"

It was Kusanagi. When Tatsuka stood, he only came up to her chest, but his rotund torso was probably twice as big around.

"Today I'm after information, not gadgets. I want to know about the Dreamery businesses in this area—the unauthorized ones, that is."

"Dreameries, huh? Why are you interested in something so outdated?"

"Do you really want to know?" Kusanagi shone a cold smile on the shopkeeper.

"... No. Forget it."

Totsuka remembered a former competitor of his who had never come back after getting too deeply involved with Kusanagi. The man had gotten too greedy. He'd tried to find out what she was investigating—and had eventually disappeared. When he was discovered two months later at the construction site where the Port of Niihama was being expanded, his entire body had been pulverized by a cement mixer. All that remained was a fragment of his cybernetic body that bore his identification code.

Kusanagi didn't hide the fact that she was a Public Safety officer in her dealings with Totsuka and the other contraband merchants. She needed the information and products they commanded, and in exchange, she was willing to close her eyes to their activities.

There wasn't a merchant among them that didn't have some skeletons in his closet, and each of them had a public persona and a private one. Totsuka's backdoor business was selling information, and he functioned as an antenna for Kusanagi. In his transactions with her, sometimes he came out laughing and other times crying. For these reasons, Totsuka was convinced that he had to maintain a certain degree of distance when dealing with Kusanagi if he wanted to survive.

Totsuka went to the back of his shop and retrieved an

old-fashioned notebook-style terminal. People had carried these around thirty years ago, before the implantable and wearable ones had become widespread. Commands were entered linguistically though a keyboard, encoded, and sent to a central processing unit for execution.

"That's quite the dinosaur," Kusanagi remarked.

Totsuka turned the power on and the speaker emitted a cheap start-up tone. Compared to a cyberbrain, it took a mind-bogglingly long time to boot. When the screen stabilized to show a white command prompt against a black background, Totsuka hand-entered a command.

"On the Net, I'm always more afraid of someone snagging information from me. With this baby, if push came to shove I could destroy the whole hard disk to cover my tracks. Besides, it's fun using it to convert Net information."

Totsuka took a memory disk out of his jacket pocket and grabbed a connecting terminal from the pile in the back of the shop. He linked the memory unit to the old-fashioned terminal.

When he keyed in another command, a bar appeared on the screen and began to change color in short increments. It was replicating the information from the memory terminal.

"It takes 180 seconds just to replicate information?"

"What can you do? It has to confirm the coded information inside the memory terminal by reading it at the same time."

"You have information on the Dreameries in there?"

"Yeah. But I don't have much to do with them so I can't tell

you anything very detailed. The best I can give you is superficial info on the shopkeepers."

"That's fine. I can find out the rest on my own."

When the replication was complete, Totsuka handed the terminal to Kusanagi. Kusanagi connected it to the dummy barrier strapped to her hip pouch. The information flowed through the device and into her cyberbrain.

"No viruses," she remarked.

"You offend me! I know better than to try to poison you. Trust me!"

"I do trust you. That's why I don't erase your memory and burn out your brain."

"I don't know if I should be thrilled, but I'm definitely deeply grateful."

Kusanagi didn't reply.

"Already on the Net, eh?" he sighed.

Kusanagi was diving the Net based on the information she'd obtained from Totsuka, conducting her next search. She referenced the coordinates and shop information from the memory terminal against a map of the cyberbrain district and began to gather the relevant coded information from the Net. In the cyberbrain district alone, there were sixty-four licensed pseudo-memory viewing vendors. The illegal dealers catered to a smaller market with unusual tastes, and there were only eight of them. She would have to narrow in on these eight. If she approached one of the businesses, the news would spread quickly

through the Net and by word of mouth. It was a small town, after all. By the time she approached the next shop, it would probably be empty.

Since she had run into Kazei earlier, it might be possible to find the right shop by tracing his footsteps. He and Shikawa both went to the Niihama Ground SDF Cadet School. Since the students probably shared information about their favorite spots, there was a good chance they'd been to the same Dreamery.

Kusanagi opened another window in her cyberbrain and extracted a map of the cyberbrain district. She displayed the site where she had run into Kazei.

She messaged an operator at headquarters. *<Kusanagi speaking. Permission to access Public Safety Monitoring Network.>*

While she was sending the transmission, she opened an encoded individual authentication screen.

<This is headquarters. Confirming individual authentication for—Motoko Kusanagi. Access granted.>

The Public Safety Monitoring Network was a surveillance system that was installed in roads and facilities throughout the country. By searching travel time measuring systems, like the N system that automatically photographed speeding vehicles and read their license plates, she could find records of the movements and location of a particular person from the information collected in the enormous database that was the Net.

A person's name and credit card information was the best tool to find out where and when somebody had bought something, what they had purchased, and how much they'd spent. Normally, this information was protected to ensure the privacy

of the individual. But for a supra-legal organization like Section 9, it was a powerful reference tool for investigations.

In this cyberbrain-dominated society, every time a person accessed the Net they left a record of their activities in a Net log. Hackers covered their footsteps, but most Net users paid the records no mind. For the sake of convenience, the individual consented to become an article of information and allowed him or herself to be classified and monitored. This transformation took place the moment a person was born and given a name that allowed him or her to be recognized as an individual.

Some people were strongly opposed to being assigned a value and managed numerically, but in order to withdraw from the system they would first have to abandon their name, which was itself an article of information.

But that would mean giving up their identity as an individual in society.

When a person was expelled from the structure of the society that had been built to sustain their lives, he or she had nowhere to go. In a modern society flooded with information, it was a senseless choice.

Fortunately, Yō Kazei, the subject Kusanagi was looking for, was present and accounted for within the framework.

She called up a list of his activity records in the cyberbrain district, cross-referencing it with the personal information and search information she'd obtained about him earlier.

Seventy-two minutes prior to his encounter with Kusanagi at the entrance to the cyberbrain district, Kazei had used his credit card to withdraw cash at an ATM near the Niihama Cyberbrain

District Train Station. She traced his subsequent movements.

She found Kazei and Takegawa in the N system omnidirectional image near the intersection that led from the main street of the district into the sub-levels. They were headed toward the sub-levels. She cross-referenced the map of the path Kazei had taken with the Dreamery information she had obtained from Totsuka. There were three possible candidates.

Now, Kusanagi searched the surveillance device to see if any records existed for Hisamitsu Shikawa, the boy Section 9 had arrested as a Good Morning Terrorist.

The results came up instantly.

There was a record of Shikawa in the same surveillance device that had captured Kazei. The record was dated four days before the attack.

The image showed Shikawa emerging onto the main street from the same road that Kazei and Takegawa had used to go into the sub-levels. There was no record of him entering the road. There were infinite entrances, so it would have been a waste of time to try to locate the one he'd used.

What other determinants can I use?

Kusanagi remembered the spider-web-like hub she'd seen when she'd dived into Shikawa's cyberbrain—one of the Net infrastructure relay points that dotted the cyberbrain district.

She superimposed the coordinates of all of the hubs in the cyberbrain district over the map in her cyberbrain. Of the three Dreameries she'd singled out earlier, one of them was next to a hub. It was located in a zone that hadn't yet undergone urban renewal.

This was it.

Kusanagi exited the Net.

The gleam returned to Kusanagi's eyes. When she looked around, she saw Totsuka bent over her pouch, scrutinizing it.

"You like my dummy barrier?"

At the sound of her voice, Totsuka jumped away, startled.

"I-I didn't do anything! I was just looking at the model number to see what kind of connectors the latest hardware barriers will automatically reject."

"Oh, is that so?"

Kusanagi removed the dummy barrier from her hip pouch and extended the connector that linked to cables. Its female port had an overlapping female port of the same diameter plugged into it. The extra connector was equipped with a miniscule transmitter.

Kusanagi waved the bug in Totsuka's face.

"You can have this back. See you next time."

"Th-thank you."

Kusanagi walked away, leaving Totsuka gaping after her, his face twitching.

It was already nightfall.

The cyberbrain district was still swarming with people. Without hesitation, Kusanagi turned down the road from the bustling main street towards the sub-levels.

The road was dark and dreary, and even though it was winter the air was warm and humid. The brightness of the avenue,

with its luminous electric billboards, made the gloom of the sub-levels seem even more pronounced.

The pavement was strewn with garbage. Air conditioners and Net cables decorated the concrete walls of the buildings, and the vaporized heat expelled by the air conditioners and vents raised the temperature of the alleyway.

Kusanagi strode confidently into the alley. She surveyed her surroundings and proceeded slowly as she messaged Section 9.

<Kusanagi here. Send two Tachikomas to the following coordinates.>

<Roger.>

Just as the mechanical voice of the operator responded, a transmission from the Tachikomas broke in.

<Hi, Major! What can we do for you?>

<You're to act as insurance. I want you two to monitor the Dreameries at these two locations. Secure anyone who tries to flee them. Understood?>

<May we please have permission to use grenades?>

<Denied.> Kusanagi responded icily to the Tachikomas' cheerful request.

<But what if they come at us with antitank artillery?>

<If that happens, beat a swift retreat. If you break down in a place like this, the hyenas will strip you down to the last screw.>

<Is being stripped the same as being disassembled?>

<That's right. Take care that you don't get stripped down to your neurochips, sucked up in a vacuum cleaner, and sold on the shelves of cyberbrain district shops.>

<Roger!> the Tachikomas sang.

The edge of the slum neighborhood came into view. These were the sub-levels of the cyberbrain district. The homeless people lying at the side of the road glanced at the incongruous visitor.

As she moved deeper into the slum, the stench and air pressure increased, and minute electromagnetic waves crawled on her cyberbrain like bugs. Probably voyeuristic hackers trying to get a glimpse inside.

But the hackers that tried to cross Kusanagi's ghost line disappeared from the Net after being repulsed by a strong and unexpectedly vicious attack barrier. The lucky ones sustained extensive damage to their cyberbrains; the unlucky ones had their brains fried to a crisp.

Kusanagi didn't feel the slightest twinge of sympathy for these hackers, and she walked on unconcerned.

She followed the cables that crawled along the walls of the buildings, reasoning that they would lead her to the relay point she was trying to find.

Finally, she came to a massive hub on one of the walls, illuminated from below by the streetlights. Cables radiated out from it in all directions. It truly did resemble a humongous spider web spun across the wall. All around, shanties formed a make-shift residential neighborhood.

The city was asleep. There was no sign of human activity.

This is the place.

The site she was looking at corresponded exactly to the place

she'd seen in Shikawa's memory. This was the place where Shikawa had taken the gun from the mysterious boy.

The map in Kusanagi's cyberbrain indicated that the shanty in front of her was the shop she was looking for. She walked along the wall, swiftly approaching its door. Beyond it was a wall with no visible entrance. She thought about entering from the roof, but given the weight of her cybernetic body and the crude materials of the roof, she doubted it would hold her weight.

Kusanagi pulled out the Sebro M5 from her hip holster and flattened her back against the wall.

She had the nineteen loaded shots, plus one. The gun was loaded with 5.45X18mm high-speed armor-piercing shells strong enough to penetrate a cybernetic body and break its interior machinery. It was the standard-issue handgun used by Section 9, and Kusanagi was never without hers.

There were no sounds from the inside.

She looked at the door. Beneath the doorknob, there was a ten-key pad for entering a security code.

Kusanagi stifled a laugh.

Near the bottom of the door, she spotted an inconspicuous connector. The ten-key was probably just a decoy, set up to trigger some kind of trap. The real lock was a popular model designed to recognize the cyberprints of the proprietor. It was an incongruous feature on such a ramshackle slum shanty.

Bull's-eye.

From what she'd seen, Kusanagi was sure that the walls of the shanty were fashioned to appear rickety at first glance, but

were actually designed with enough impenetrability to buy time in the event of an attack.

If she'd had backup with her, Kusanagi could have penetrated the building through a variety of methods, such as knocking out the door hinges with slack shot. But she was alone. Better to err on the side of safety. She would have to do something about that lock. She was curious about what sort of trap might spring if she fiddled with the keypad, but that could wait until after she had taken care of business.

Kusanagi drew out a cable from her dummy barrier and inserted it into the electronic lock's connector. For identification purposes, the lock's model number was included in the signals it sent out, allowing Kusanagi to identify its make.

It was a Mitsuwa electronic lock, circa 2025.

She tried to see if she could infiltrate Mitsuwa Lock's corporate database from the Net. For a lock company, their security system was surprisingly orthodox. The barrier itself was stout enough, but it wasn't an attack barrier. With a bit of time and effort, a hacker of Kusanagi's caliber could find a way in without leaving any evidence of her intrusion.

She sought out the model number in question and downloaded it. If she got distracted and wasted time, there was an increased risk that she might leave behind Branches. When she had what she needed, Kusanagi came back out of the Net. The whole process had taken less than twenty seconds.

She washed the cyberprint she'd obtained from the maker into the electronic lock.

Ka-chink. The door made a small click as it unlocked. Crouching

low, Kusanagi turned the doorknob slowly and opened the door just two centimeters. She unclipped a mirror from her belt and slid it through the crack to peek inside, but she didn't see any traps.

Kusanagi stood up and opened the door.

Inside, she could see a shabby table and chair. A memory box rested on the table. There was also a locker and an empty bed. Other than that, the room was empty.

"Anybody home?"

Kusanagi scanned the room. Had the person detected her intrusion immediately and fled already? There was no sign of another entrance.

She felt the bed. The sheets were cold, indicating that nobody had lain there in the past few hours.

Next, she examined the memory box on the table. It was an older model, and its exterior had spots of rust. Some of the coating on the wires was coming off, too, revealing their copper cores.

"Another decoy." Kusanagi slapped the box and set it down without investigating its contents.

The only thing left was the locker.

She approached the tall steel cabinet and slowly opened its door. It was a very common kind of locker, with steel mesh shelves and a single bar at the top. Its only contents were three blindfolds.

Kusanagi examined the area around it attentively. It stood right up against the wall. There were no marks on the floor that

suggested it had been forcibly moved or dragged, either.

But she did notice something else.

"What's this?"

Faint scuffing—the kind of marks that rubber soles make on a floor.

Kusanagi bent down to examine the floor's surface from a different angle.

The marks made a path between the locker and the front door. The path looked like it had been created naturally from repeated traffic back and forth across the same area.

When she was sure, Kusanagi opened the locker door again. She looked it over once more and then carefully stepped inside.

Immediately, the back of the locker opened without a sound. A long, concrete corridor appeared behind it.

"So this is the real entrance."

Judging from the depth of the shanty, it was probably a door that had originally existed in the wall of the building behind it. Kusanagi stepped into the corridor.

The air inside was frigid, and the concrete walls and floor were also cold to the touch. There had to be some reason why this place needed to be kept so chilly.

At the end of the concrete corridor stood a steel door. It was an ordinary-looking door, and when Kusanagi tested the door-knob it didn't seem to be locked. She opened it.

She was met by a wave of even colder air. The room inside was seven by seven meters square. A display of high-performance cyberbrain equipment lined one wall. Cables ran

from these devices to five beds. They were the type of hospital beds that were used during cyberbrain surgeries, with a micro-machine implanting apparatus installed at the head. There was even a manipulator for remote surgical procedures. None of it was the kind of equipment you'd expect to find in the middle of a slum.

Kusanagi's attention was immediately drawn to a memory box attached to the bottom of one of the beds.

It had a brain shell mounted on top.

When she bent over to pull the information out of it, she spotted the shadow of an attacker behind her. She twisted her body to dodge the assault. A white light flashed millimeters in front of her face.

The tip of the hard blade sent off sparks as it hit the concrete floor.

When she looked back, she saw a dwarf with a huge knife in each hand, crouching down as he got ready to spring. He leapt into the air and kicked off the low ceiling, stabbing towards Kusanagi with his knives. Kusanagi dropped straight onto her back, dodging the blades. At the same time, she kicked and caught the dwarf squarely in the stomach as he flew over her head.

The dwarf's back crashed against the ceiling.

Leaping to her feet with the momentum of her kick, Kusanagi aimed another sharp middle-kick at the dwarf as he fell to the ground. But the dwarf rolled himself up into a ball and evaded the blow. When he landed, he leapt away to distance himself

from Kusanagi while rearing back to hurl both of his knives at her.

He never had the chance. Two high-speed armor-piercing shells from Kusanagi's Sebro M5 blew off both of his arms, sending him flying backwards through the air. He hit the wall with a loud metallic CLANG.

Kusanagi and the dwarf faced off.

Even with both arms gone, the dwarf seemed undaunted. He charged at Kusanagi, his mouth open wide to reveal two rows of sharp fangs.

Just before his teeth reached her throat, Kusanagi swung out an arm, knocking the charging dwarf away from her.

The dwarf crashed into one of the beds, and his jaws clamped down on one of the cables running out of it.

For a brief instant, the air was filled with blue-white sparks.

"Stunfangs!" Kusanagi exclaimed aloud.

Stunfangs were a contraband close-combat weapon favored by the cyborg guerillas of southeast Asia. Fangs embedded with electrodes extended from the upper and lower jaw, and when sunk into their victim, they released a high-voltage electrical current that could destroy a cybernetic body from the inside. The word "stun" didn't sufficiently describe the damage they could wreak.

Even with all of her combat experience from her stint in the armed forces, Kusanagi had only heard stories about stunfangs. This was the first time she had actually encountered them.

A stream of electricity issued forth from the dwarf's teeth. If

Kusanagi had been bitten, she would have been a goner.

Slowly, the dwarf stood back up.

"Have it your way," Kusanagi murmured.

Once more, the dwarf bared his fangs at Kusanagi.

"HA!" With a wild yell, he launched himself at her again, disappearing from her field of vision.

He was down low. He had sprung at her along the floor this time, his fangs seeking not her neck, but her ankles.

Again, the vicious fangs bore down on Kusanagi.

Her right arm moved. There was a burst of flame.

It was the fire of the high-speed armor-piercing shells of her Sebro M5.

The dwarf's stunfangs were forever parted before they got to Kusanagi's flesh. Blasted in two, they clattered to the floor on either side of her.

The dwarf's body lay flattened on the floor in front of her. His head had been completely shattered by the shot. Kusanagi looked down at him and aimed her Sebro M5 at his back.

He didn't move.

"You want more?" Kusanagi asked, addressing his back. She pointed the gun at his right leg and pulled the trigger, her face completely impassive. A crisp shot rang out, and the dwarf's lower leg was blown to smithereens. The dwarf still didn't so much as flinch.

"Okay. You win."

The voice came from behind her back.

Slowly, she turned around.

Immediately the dwarf's body sprang up from the floor. With

his remaining left leg he leapt into the air, pivoting to aim his heel at Kusanagi's head.

Another shot rang out.

Kusanagi's head was still turned the other way. Only her right hand was directed towards the him.

With his left leg blown off, the dwarf writhed, limbless, on the floor.

Kusanagi removed the spent clip from her gun and put in a new one.

This time, she pointed it at the memory box at the foot of the bed.

"What next?" she smiled.

"You're a tough cookie. Most people'd be lying dead on the floor with their heads split open by this point." The voice came out of a speaker set up next to the bed.

"Sure. That's because they're not me."

"This is a fine mess. If you do any more damage I'm afraid I won't be able to repair everything on my own."

A dull rumble filled the room as half of the bed hinged upwards toward the ceiling. The remote surgery manipulator began to move, and a camera above the bed pointed itself at Kusanagi.

The bed itself was the dwarf's body.

"Now I'll be needing a new cyberbody."

Kusanagi was still holding her gun ready.

"So, you've just been kicking back and having a nice rest while remotely controlling that close-combat cyborg?"

"My cyberbrain only functions in this room, so I use that

body when I need to go out. Now you've gone and demolished my outdoors body. Listen, would you mind lowering your gun? I won't resist anymore—I've played all my cards already."

"If words could be trusted, I wouldn't have to carry a gun in this town. I'm afraid I'll be the one making the demands. Your job is to answer. Got that?"

"You're not an ordinary cop, are you? Are you from Public Safety?"

Ignoring the question, Kusanagi began to interrogate her subject.

"I have three questions for you. First, I want to know if this boy came here or not."

Kusanagi pulled a photograph of Hisamitsu Shikawa out of the inside pocket of her jacket. The bed's manipulator extended to grasp the photograph and bring it up to the camera's lens.

"This kid? He was a regular here. Same kid who took a bunch of people hostage in the cyberbrain district, right?"

Kusanagi took the photo back from the manipulator and put it back in her pocket.

"Do you know what dreams the boy watched here?"

"Of course I do. I'm the one who set them up. They were your standard adult dreams, that's all."

"Standard? They were Realies, weren't they?"

"Sure. They were contraband. 'Amazon Warriors from Hell,' 'Private Lesson with Foxy Teacher,' 'Tales of a Female Prison Guard'—the list goes on and on. All B-list trash that only appeals to cult fans. Want to try one?"

"Thanks, but I'm not interested. Right now, my only interest is what made that boy turn into a terrorist. Not your influence, I hope?"

The bed waved its manipulator back and forth in denial. "Of course not! What would I stand to gain by turning that kid into an indiscriminate killer? I've got no beef with the establishment—as long as I can continue my business, whether underground or aboveground, I've got no complaints."

"I see." Kusanagi took out a disk. "Second question. I have here a clip from a memory fragment we extracted from Shikawa. I want to know if you recognize the person who appears in it."

"Slip it into that slot on the bed there."

Kusanagi inserted the disk in the slot at the side of the bed.

"What the . . . !" The bed let out a shocked exclamation when the footage began to play.

"The location seems to be right in front of this shop. You recognize the hub, I assume?"

"Now that you mention it, yes. But it's the kid that surprises me."

"You've seen him before?"

The bed ejected the disk. "No," it said tonelessly. "I'd like to see a kid like that try walking around in this neighborhood alone. The dirty old men in their specialty shops would snatch him up in a second."

Kusanagi put the disk away.

"When was the last time Shikawa was here?"

"Around a week ago, I'd say."

Two days had gone by since the incident. Shikawa had been here and downloaded a memory five days ago. Three days later, he'd perpetrated the attack.

"What dream did he view?"

"I don't remember. But if you check the server's access log against his ghost key you can probably find it."

Kusanagi looked at one of the cyberbrain terminals mounted on the wall where all of the cables seemed to congregate. That must be the server.

"Where did you get that dream?"

The dwarf/bed didn't answer.

"If you don't tell me, I'll just have to consult your memory."

Kusanagi pulled out a plug and began to approach the bed's memory box.

"Okay, okay! I'll talk! It's better than having you rummaging around in my brain!" The bed's camera drooped in surrender. "Have you ever heard of a memorist?"

"Memorist?"

"Yeah. They're the artists that create pseudo-memories. In your mainstream Dreameries, they graft them into the clients' memories. The pseudo-memories serve to prime the pump, but ultimately the clients' individual preferences determine the dream that they see. The memorists I work with, on the other hand, just steal people's existing memories. They create a ghost key for someone who's connected to the Net and use it to cross the person's ghost line and snag some memories. Unless they take a really large quantity, or make off with a really important memory from the deeper levels, the person who was robbed

just thinks he's forgotten it. Nobody notices. Sometimes, the cerebral nerve networks can even work together to reconstruct it."

"They sound like pickpockets."

"Exactly. They're pickpockets that lift memories. But as far as hacking goes, these guys know what they're doing. Especially when it comes to lock-breaking. They can break down stuff like car barriers in nothing flat."

"If they're so skilled, why are they satisfied working as petty thieves?"

"They're all hardcore voyeurs. Their greatest thrill is to peep at what's going on in somebody else's life. They're willing to do anything that allows them that."

"So they collect these memories, and when they're done with them, they come and sell them to you. Is that right?"

"Yeah. They spy out a memory of someone having a good time with a lady, wash it into their own memory field, and link it up to other memories. Then it feels like their own memory, see? Then they replay the memory to get off. That's their thing. Most of them come to me with sex Realies to sell, but some of them are into really messed-up shit. Some'll steal memories of people experiencing pain, or memories that make you want to puke. The other day I had a guy in here with a pinched memory of someone who'd eaten some raw oysters and gotten food poisoning. It was absolutely brutal. I felt like my stomach fluids were going to come up, and I don't even have a stomach."

"Who was the memorist who brought in the memory Shikawa saw?"

"As I recall, he was a new guy I haven't seen around here

much. I don't know where he got it, but he said he'd filched the memory of an active member of the military. I bought it because that sort of thing has scarcity value."

"Do you remember him having any distinguishing characteristics?"

"No. He was a completely run-of-the-mill middle-aged guy. The kind of guy who's only memorable for the fact that he's totally forgettable. Now that I think of it, he brought me that memory just before the last visit by that Shikawa kid you mentioned who turned terrorist. I remember now. But all of the so-called brand-new adult Realies he sold me turned out to be crap that you can find lying around on the Net. Guess I got ripped off. I didn't want to waste them so I sold 'em as new releases anyway. That Shikawa kid was the first one to watch that new Realie."

"The first one?"

"Yeah, I'm sure of it. The next one was another kid from the same school. He's a regular here, too."

"A regular?" The image of Takegawa and Kazei flashed into the back of Kusanagi's mind. "Where are the memories?"

"In the server there. I suppose you intend to take them with you."

"I'm glad we understand each other." Kusanagi eyed the cyberbrain apparatus installed along the wall.

"It's better than having you plunder through everything on your own. I've told you everything I know. The rest is up to you to find out, Miss Public Safety." The manipulator pointed a finger at her.

"I intend to."

Kusanagi inserted her plug into the server. An immense quantity of data flowed into her cyberbrain. Kusanagi built a conduit to channel the information to Section 9's terminals via the Net. Now she could leave it alone and the memories would continue to transfer over to Section 9.

<Tachikomas, you can abandon your watches now. Report immediately to point N135Z-E25P.>

<Ro-ger!>

She closed her conversation with the Tachikomas. Now, what to do with the dwarf? Just as she began to consider the question, his voice cut in.

"I'll just be going now," it said. In an instant, its presence disappeared from the bed.

She heard a loud noise outside the room. It came from the shanty at the entrance.

The door to the corridor opened, and a dwarf's face peeked in. So, the memory box at the foot of the bed had been another decoy.

"See ya later!"

With that, the dwarf sped off at full speed, before Kusanagi had the chance to catch him.

When she returned to the shanty, she saw that the bed there had been overturned to expose a hole in the floor in the shape of a person. Even if she went after him now, he'd probably be long gone.

"Probably wasn't even his real body either," she muttered.

She had to hand it to them—the denizens of the cyberbrain

district were tough nuts to crack. The actual person was probably operating these various prosthetic bodies from a remote location—relay-hacking into other peoples' terminals and giving them life. Anyone who went after them was doomed to chase one relay-terminal after another, never to discover their true operator.

Kusanagi sent the police a report that she'd uncovered an illegal memory dealer, ordered the Tachikomas to secure the premises, and headed back to Section 9.

Chapter 10



Back at headquarters, Kusanagi began to analyze the memories she'd forwarded the moment she entered the computer room.

She was alone—Ishikawa was nowhere to be seen.

She connected her brain to the memory box to which the memories had been sent. Most of the memories in the box were adult Realies. Better start with the memories Shikawa had seen, she reasoned.

Kusanagi lowered her cyberbrain activity to a sleep-state level and quickly improvised an emulator to replay dreams formed in REM sleep.

She replayed the Realies.

The unfamiliar memory set off her synapses, stimulating her five senses.

It was a run-of-the-mill adult dream. Standard setup, standard climax. A typical passive-male sex fantasy. Teenaged boys

probably weren't all that picky, she supposed. She played the entire dream, but ultimately there was nothing useful in it.

Next, she searched the server for information on the shop's repeat clients.

There were more than ten students of the Niihama Ground Self-Defense Forces Cadet Technical School. Among them were Takegawa and Kazei, the students she'd run into in the cyber-brain district.

Realies were illegal, but they were child's play compared to cyberbrain drugs and the like. The police might punish someone for selling Realies, but they wouldn't bother with someone who bought them.

What was the common link among the Good Morning Terrorists?

Kusanagi reviewed the list of incidents in her mind.

October 22, 2028. Tō Kasamatsu's suicide bombing of the Niihama Paper Media. Age at time of incident: fourteen.

October 25th, 2028. Hideaki Katsuta's suicide bombing of a housing complex in Niihama. Age at time of incident: fourteen.

October 26th, 2028. Iwao Muramatsu's suicide bombing of the Niihama University Affiliated Senior High School. Age at time of incident: fourteen.

November 2nd, 2028. Roy Makabe's suicide bombing in a stolen car in Hakata. Age at time of incident: fourteen.

October 18th, 2029. Kōji Hitachi and Shogo Omitsu's hostage incident in Hakata. Age at time of incident: fifteen.

October 22nd, 2029. Tomonori Yamagata's bus-jacking attempt and subsequent suicide. Age at time of incident, fifteen.

October 23rd, 2029. Yūji Tone and three others' rampage and suicide in the Technoline. Age at time of incident: fifteen.

October 27th, 2029. Michael Tomobe's self-immolation during a demonstration for refugee liberation in the Kanto Refugee Zone. Age at time of incident: fifteen.

October 28th, 2029. Kei Magome's hostage incident during a sports event in Komatsu and subsequent cyberbrain suicide. Age at time of incident: fifteen.

October 30th, 2029. Kōichi Fujishiro's suicide bombing. Age at time of incident: fifteen.

November 7th, 2029. Tōji Ishioka's carjacking and hostage incident. He'd led the police on a wild car chase with the car's occupants still inside, ultimately committing suicide. Age at time of incident: fifteen.

September 12th, 2030. Makoto Yūki's suicide bombing attempt at the Hanamaki Police Department. Age at time of incident: sixteen.

And finally, five days ago, Hisamitsu Shikawa's hostage incident at an electronics superstore. Age at time of incident: sixteen.

So far, all of the terrorists were between the ages of fourteen and sixteen.

Not only did the crimes all take place in different places, their methodology and targets were all different. It seemed noteworthy that all the attacks were concentrated between the months of September and November, but beyond that there was no consistent pattern.

What did the incidents have in common?

As she displayed the data on the various crimes, Kusanagi noticed something.

"They were all born in the year 2014," she murmured aloud. The fact that the perpetrators got older as she went down the list was because the boys born in 2014 were getting older.

Why did they all have to be born in that year? Historically, there were no major crimes that took place in 2014. In any case, it was clear that boys born in that year were an important key to the Good Morning Terrorism mystery.

So was that memory fragment.

Kusanagi set the "Year of Birth" parameter in the cyberbrain structure of the memory viewer.

2014.

She entered the code and began replaying memories.

For a short time, a variety of sex memories replayed in her mind. She regarded them impassively as they unfolded around her.

But when she replayed "Private Lesson with Foxy Teacher," something unexpected occurred. This time, instead of the scenes she'd seen before, different footage interspersed with static came through in fragments.

An image of the interior of a passenger plane.

Oxygen masks dangling from the ceiling.

Nearly all of the passengers were assuming crash positions, ducking their heads and hugging their knees with their feet up on the seats.

On the wall at the front of the plane, the No Smoking sign was lit up and a monitor directed passengers to fasten their seat belts.

She felt a sickening jolt.

She could only see the floor—something was forcing her head down.

It was her mother's hand. Her memory told her so.

Finally her vision settled on her own fingertips.

That was when it happened.

A single gunshot echoed through the plane.

A hijacking.

She heard the noise, but she couldn't see who had shot the gun. Whoever's memory it was, they probably hadn't lifted their head when it had happened.

The person in the next seat had been shot.

It was the mother of the memory's owner.

It would be her turn next.

Just then, a large quantity of memory suddenly came pouring into Kusanagi's cyberbrain. *What was this?*

Dear Father . . .

Kusanagi had a sudden realization. *This memory was someone's last wishes.*

Just then, she was immersed in a flood of heat and light.

Whiteness.

The white light washed over everything. The memory ended.

Kusanagi thought she'd seen something in the midst of that white light.

She'd heard something, too.

There'd also been a sensation of things melting together.

"An attempt to forcibly meld memories," she murmured.

Ishikawa entered the room.

"Oh, there you are, Major!"

"What is it?"

"We've finally cracked the key code pattern of that Northern brainwashing device—I had the Red Suits help me. For such an antique, it was pretty well-built . . ."

Kusanagi cut him off. "I'd love to hear all about how it was well-built later, but first can you give me the results from the key code analysis?"

"Oh, sorry. It's in the Section 9 database under code NK2469."

"Here it is." Kusanagi dropped the key code into her cyber-brain.

"What do you plan to do with that, Major?"

"There's one commonality between all of the Good Morning Terrorist attackers—they were all born in 2014."

"I see. One of the criteria for activation had to do with year of birth, eh? We wouldn't have noticed that from the angle our analysis took."

"There's a strong possibility that the agent that triggered the terrorist behavior was an adult dream created by a memorist. There was something very odd hidden in one of the thirteen memories Shikawa viewed."

"Something odd?"

"I think it's the memory of a boy who was killed in a hijacking incident. It contains his last wishes. I couldn't determine what they were, though."

"I wonder what someone could be trying to accomplish with this hijacking memory."

"I think that the key code to the Northern brainwashing

device used by the dream's creator just might hold the answer to that question. I'll give it a try."

Once again, Kusanagi connected her cyberbrain to the memory box.

She referenced the key code to the memory she had just seen. Immediately, a web-like system of links appeared.

<Ishikawa, are you monitoring this?>

<Yeah. The structure has an interesting pattern, doesn't it? The links all go in one direction—meeting at the limbic system. Almost like a spider's web.>

<They're forming a system that would trigger an overexcretion of noradrenaline in the cyberbrain. This structure, here. It's a rage-inducing program, designed to incite someone to break down obstacles to change a situation.>

<And that was what drove those boys to terrorism?>

<No. This is only enough to cause impulse-dominated behavior patterns. It might alter the boys' personalities somewhat, but I doubt it would be enough to turn them into self-destructive terrorists. There's one more condition you need to make that happen: a motive.>

<So, for example, if they were watching the news and saw something that made them angry . . . >

<It's quite possible that external factors could have served as triggers. But if we assume that the Good Morning Terrorist attacks have some kind of purpose in mind, that scenario doesn't allow you to create terrorists with a specific target. It would only give rise to indiscriminate, purposeless attacks. That's not really terrorism—just psychotic crime.>

<Then you'd need at least some minimal insurance. Could it be that

there's something among the memories in this box that serves that purpose?>

<There might be. I'll run a trace.> Kusanagi scanned the box's memories one by one.

If someone were creating these terrorists for a reason, there had to be a memory somewhere that contained the seed. She searched for links connected to the anger factor incited by the memory Shikawa had watched.

Zero. The links to what she was searching for didn't exist.

It had to be there, but it wasn't.

Even if external events were the triggers, there still had to be some kind of ignition to spark the explosions. She couldn't see it, but she knew it was there.

She searched intently through the memories, performing a diversified scan on the links that should connect to the seed. Then she elevated her perspective to the Net level to peruse the entire cyberbrain from a bird's-eye view.

Among the memory groups, there was one empty spot that contained no identifying information.

What's this?

Invisible memory.

There was definitely memory in that space, but the access tag necessary to replay it had been deleted.

This space had to be significant.

Maybe it was the white light that she had seen in the adult dream she'd found in the Dreamery's memory box.

<Someone's deliberately erased the identifying information.>

<That reminds me of a certain cyberbrain memory therapy technique they use to treat Post Traumatic Stress Disorder,> Ishikawa remarked. <In order to prevent someone from reliving a certain memory, they purposely erase the necessary tags, rendering it inaccessible.>

<Intentionally blocking access to a traumatic memory—that's pretty heavy-handed.>

<The rationale is that traumatic memories may be linked to other memories, so you can't just wantonly erase them. They've used it to treat psychological problems in war veterans and to eliminate anxiety in soldiers that have to perform particularly brutal operations, by making it temporarily difficult for them to recall memories associated with fear. It's a more certain method than getting them high on drugs.>

<I'm going to try to replay this memory,> Kusanagi said.

<I'll monitor you. Be careful.>

<I know.>

Kusanagi assigned provisional identifying information to the memory, restoring it to a replayable state. She began to wash it into her own memory field . . .

Her entire body felt weighted down.

Something tingled in her hands.

What was it?

She could feel her hands wrapped around something. It felt like a control stick.

The memory began to project into her field of vision.

A vast sea of clouds.

She was choking for air.

Something was pressing against her face.

A mask. A pilot's oxygen mask.

It was the memory of a pilot flying a war plane. The information wasn't just visual—all five senses were stimulated.

The weather was rough.

She felt the pilot's tension.

Kusanagi referenced the image of the instruments in front of her with fighter plane information from the Net. She found what she was looking for in the Ministry of Defense's database.

An FA18F.

She was traveling faster than the speed of sound.

The sea of clouds parted to reveal several points of light ahead.

Airway and anti-collision beacons.

A civilian passenger plane was in front of them. Its identifying signal told her that it was JNA flight 123.

JNA 123. Kusanagi had heard that flight number before.

Suddenly, an alarm began to blare.

She felt her finger on a trigger.

Her vision went pitch black—

The memory ended there. At the same instant, Kusanagi felt something press into her cyberbrain.

What's this!?

A dark memory.

Is this man . . . ?

The brief feeling ended.

Instead, she felt an overwhelming sense of danger.

Kusanagi forcibly severed her connection to the memory box. For a brief moment, a shower of sparks blew out of her dummy barrier.

Forcing a close on the software level of one's cyberbrain during a system-locked stage risked causing a no-op. The most effective measure was to physically sever the connection on the hardware level, even though it involved some risk of retaining inconsistent memory in one's cyberbrain.

"That was close," she said.

"I think you hit some kind of barrier."

"Something was coming toward me. I could feel it. It might have been a military barrier or something." She brushed her hair away and yanked out the plug in her neck. The plug that had been connected to the memory box was burnt.

"It was the memory of a pilot advancing in a scramble," she said, eying the memory box. "I'm sure this sort of thing isn't easy to come by. And also . . ."

JNA 123.

Kusanagi selected the corresponding flight information on the Net.

There were countless hits on the news sites.

Dawn, October 22, 2024.

Typhoon 14 had changed course unexpectedly, causing the crash of domestic passenger flight JNA 123 from Sapporo to Niihama, at a point forty kilometers off of the port of Ishikawa. The media reported that all 176 passengers were killed.

That morning, in the calm after the storm, emergency search

vessels dispatched by the Coast Guard and the Self-Defense Forces had found the plane's tail and part of the fuselage floating in the ocean.

Due to high waves caused by the typhoon, a deep-sea search wasn't conducted until four days after the accident. By that time, the plane's data collector, as well as some of the bodies and wreckage, had been washed away by the tide and were never recovered.

In the aftermath, controversy emerged over the airline's failure to cancel the flight despite the dangerous weather conditions.

Others attributed the accident to an unexpected mechanical failure, reasoning that human error was unlikely since the pilot was a veteran with over twenty-thousand hours of flight experience.

In addition, longtime opposition-camp Diet member Daisō Ōmuro and his secretary were among the victims of the crash. Ōmuro had been elected after publicly promising to cut military spending, and some people went as far as to speculate that his death was the reason the spending cuts hadn't passed.

Kusanagi left the dive room and headed for Aramaki's office. She opened the door without knocking.

Aramaki stood behind his desk. Across from him, a man with glasses and a beard stood in front of the sofa.

"Haven't I told you to knock?" Aramaki reproached her.

"Never mind, Aramaki. I was just leaving," the man said.

"I see. Many pardons."

"Thank you for your time."

With that, Kubota left the room. Kusanagi bowed respectfully as he walked past her.

She heard the door close behind her.

"Director Kubota of Land SDF Intelligence?"

"The Minister of Defense has received a threatening letter," Aramaki said.

"A threat?"

"Even Kubota doesn't know what it entailed."

"And we're supposed to take the fall for the military's failures again?"

"No. Until the summit's over, our top priority is still protecting Mr. Najif."

"That's what I'm here to see you about. Najif is the ultimate target of the Good Morning Terrorist attacks. Someone hid a brainwashing program to incite his assassination in a Realie."

Kusanagi handed Aramaki a disk.

"This contains the memory. It's a product from a Dreamery that I came across while investigating the Good Morning Terrorist case."

Aramaki inserted the disk into a hand-held terminal and connected it to his cyberbrain. He closed his eyes.

A heavy silence filled the room.

From time to time, Aramaki's eyebrows gave a sudden twitch. He was replaying the memory. Then his eyes opened and he looked at Kusanagi. "Major, whose memory is this?"

"It might belong to the memorist himself. It differs from other

memories I've seen in that the format coefficient of the entire cyberbrain is much more synchronized."

"Are you suggesting that this memorist was using the Good Morning Terrorists to attempt Mr. Najif's assassination?"

"The memorist may be the link between the Red Sands and Sadoyama."

"Can you find out who he is?"

"Yes. The memory's owner seems to be in the military. He piloted an FA18F, so he had to be air force."

"If Najif is the target of the Good Morning Terrorist plot, what kind of methods will be used in the attempt?"

"I combed through the log in Shikawa's cyberbrain. He had a memory-editing program installed through the Net. At first glance it just looks like run-of-the-mill direct mail, but there's a patch that acts on this memory that was sent in fragments."

"So, they deliberately made it look like an unrelated incident. Have you pinpointed the sender?"

"It came from Komatsu. Batou and the others are already on their way there."

Aramaki's eyes gleamed. "Komatsu, eh?" he muttered.

He took out his hand-held terminal and pushed a call button.

Chapter 11



An FA18F Super Hornet drew a white line across the blue sky.

Togusa's ears were filled with the roar of its engine.

There was something inexpressively incongruous about the juxtaposition of the seven-billion-yen Super Hornets overhead and the Komatsu skyline, which was somehow reminiscent of the last century. The planes dated back a generation, but having been used in the cyberbrain wars, they were still in active use and served as the backbone of Japan's national defense.

The Air SDF's Komatsu Base wasn't far from the city. Positioned opposite the Asian continent, it was the most important defense center in Japan. The base had been established in Komatsu during the last world war to direct military operations against the continent, and after the armistice, it had remained in place, even though its original enemy no longer existed.

The city and the base shared a symbiotic relationship. The city was full of businesses that catered to soldiers. Most of the vehicles on the streets of Komatsu sported license plates with a

special code indicating military use, and the people who lived here also owed their livelihoods to the base.

These circumstances engendered forces of supply and demand that governed a unique market. Needless to say, it was a black market. Togusa knew it better than he knew the legitimate business scene.

He could hear the hustle and bustle of the shopping arcades off in the distance.

Several hundred meters down a certain road from that district was an area littered with factories and warehouses. During the war, the government had encouraged aircraft manufacturers to build factories near the base to manufacture and outfit warplanes. This had given rise to the proliferation of small factories along the back roads to subcontract work for the defense industry. Now that the war was over, the area was dominated by artisans who hand-built microparts for special-order cybernetic prosthetics.

Truth be told, it was hardly a prosperous neighborhood. Even though it was midday, the area was quieter than a tomb. The only sounds were the occasional whirl of someone grinding a part. The asphalt was stained with black oil spots, and the smell of machine lubricant pervaded the air.

Batou and Togusa were about to enter one of the many warehouses congregated here.

Togusa gripped his Mateba M2008 in his hand.

It was the newest model of the six-shot automatic revolver developed for sport shooting by Machina Thermo Ballistics Co. The cylinder attached to the full-lug barrel cocked the hammer

while sending the next bullet into the barrel with single-action loading. This specialized configuration served to improve precision aiming when firing consecutive shots. One of Togusa's idiosyncrasies was his preference for this gun.

The warehouse looked unexceptional.

Judging from the outside, it was probably the size of a small gymnasium, barely large enough to house a basketball court. The words "NO TRESPASSING" were painted across a shutter door in the front.

The upstairs windows were hung with blinds on the inside.

The walls of the warehouse were fitted with more air-conditioning units than seemed necessary. All of them were operating, pumping out the heat from inside the building.

Adjacent to the shutter there was a metal door.

Batou put his hand softly on the doorknob. He wrinkled his brow and glanced at Togusa.

<It's open,> he messaged Togusa.

Cautiously, Batou and Togusa opened the door and stepped inside.

Frigid air washed over them from the feet up. The warehouse was abnormally cold.

Quickly, they visually assessed the interior, guns held ready.

There was nobody around.

The only sign of life was the quiet humming of the machinery.

Batou and Togusa holstered their guns again and looked around the room.

"What the hell?" Batou exclaimed out loud.

The inside of the small warehouse was packed to the ceiling

with cyberbrain instruments. They were strung with cables that connected to a row of capsules large enough to hold an adult.

Batou stared incredulously at the cyberbrain equipment. The model names of the machines and the lettering on their switches was in Korean, not Japanese.

"These are the Northern brainwashing devices!"

"These things?"

"Also known as 'Soldier Training Devices.' These things can produce a horde of dauntless fighters who know no fear. Of course, the country that used them no longer exists."

Togusa peered into a capsule.

"Hey, Batou!" he shouted.

At Togusa's bidding, Batou peered into the capsule, too. Inside was the face of a young boy.

"It's a kid!"

"So's this one."

They checked all of the capsules. There were a total of six people inside. The bodies were cybernetic, not flesh-and-blood. They all seemed to be adolescents in various stages between childhood and young adulthood.

"Don't they all kind of look alike?" Batou mused softly, gazing at the bodies.

He was right. There was a definite resemblance.

Batou had a sudden realization. "They don't just look alike. These are all the prosthetic bodies of the same person!"

He opened one of the capsules. It was the one that contained the body with the most mature face.

"These aren't standard models. This face is the handiwork of

a custom designer. Someone put a lot of work into fashioning all six." As he spoke, Batou inserted a cable into the body's neck.

His brow furrowed.

"The exterior's perfect, but there's absolutely nothing inside."

"What does that mean?"

"A few memories have been dumped into this kid's cyber-brain and that's it. They all belong to other people."

"They're not his?"

"Yeah. I don't know why, but raw memories from the brains of other kids his age have been dropped into this body. Stuff about crushes on girls, motorcycles, the war, the future. He's stuffed with experiences typical of a kid his age."

"Wait just a minute. This is the site where a Memorist is supposedly delivering weapons to the Red Sands, right?" Togusa asked.

"Yeah."

"Then what's with these memory-stuffed dolls?"

Batou looked at the brainwashing devices. "I don't know what they're for. But I'll take care of this stuff. You check the capsules on the other side."

"Roger."

Batou took a simple information terminal out of his hip pouch for backup and accessed the boy's cyberbrain.

"No ghost line, of course. Without an AI, this kid's really nothing more than an external memory device."

Batou watched the memory information as it downloaded. "Naked chicks and adolescent sex stories. What a load of crap."

"Batou!" Togusa shouted.

Batou looked up. Togusa was standing in front of a capsule with a person inside.

Batou disconnected the lock and opened the capsule.

A putrid stink buffeted their nostrils.

Inside was a man they'd never seen before.

The man appeared to be in his early fifties. His beard was peppered with white hairs. His upper body was clothed in a flight jacket with synthetic heat- and water-proofing that had long since worn out, judging from its sun-bleached hue. Underneath it was a polo shirt with a darkly discolored collar.

Below, he wore cargo pants whose original color was indiscernible. His shoes were woven half-boots, with steel toes that peeked out from beneath the leather.

His forehead was creased by two deep wrinkles. In its center was a black hole.

Batou grasped the man's shoulders and pulled his torso up and over.

Togusa watched over Batou's shoulder. When the body flopped over, the back of the man's head ended up right in Togusa's face.

"Ugh!"

The man's white brain shell was exposed.

It was a commonplace brain shell made of aluminum and artificial skull. Its back had fallen off, and the backrest on the inside of the capsule was spattered with dark-red congealed blood and micromachine-filled brain fluid.

Fragments of skull and flesh crumbled off as brain fluid and blood oozed down into the backrest of the capsule.

"One shot at point-blank range," Batou observed.

Batou touched the stain. The gunk stuck to his finger, leaving a clean spot on the stained backrest.

It wasn't dry yet.

"This isn't too old," he said.

There was a hole in the bottom of the capsule's backrest. A flattened bullet was lodged in the metal plate underneath.

Batou took a Victorinox blade out of his pocket and dug the bullet out.

"Nine-by-nineteen millimeter."

Batou pushed the body back into the capsule and then crouched down, searching the floor underneath.

"Found it!"

Batou stood up. He was holding an empty cartridge between his thumb and forefinger.

"Whoever did this must have been in a big hurry—he forgot to clean up after himself. This isn't the work of a pro, leaving important things like this lying around. Plus it took him at least two shots to take this guy out."

"Batou."

Togusa was looking at the man. He retrieved the type-54 pistol from the man's hip holster. Its grip was engraved with black stars, indicating that it was a cheap Chinese knock-off.

There was no sign that it had been fired.

"He never even had a chance to pull his gun. He must have been shot when he wasn't expecting it."

Togusa stood up and regarded the man's face. "Who is he?"

"He could be the arms smuggler—the memorist the Major's looking for."

"This guy?"

"We'll need to gather more information before we know for sure—"

Just then, the sound of an engine drew near.

Batou and Togusa turned their attention to the outside. Batou ran up to the shutter and silently peeked through the mail slot.

A small truck and a van were parked outside. He watched as five men got out of the van.

"One's a novice. The rest are pros."

Sakami had ratted them out.

Batou heard the shouts of a man who looked like an office worker, his hair conservatively parted on the side. He was standing near the front of the group, armed with a SIG Sauer P220.

Someone clasped a hand over his mouth to shut him up and the four others pushed him back into the van. They were carrying Scorpion Vz61s—high-performance submachine guns from Czechoslovakia often used by commando units. They were somewhat outdated, but there were good reasons why they were still used, including their portability and usability.

The men scoured their surroundings, making sure that nobody was around. Then one of them opened the cargo door of the small truck.

Batou was shocked to see the rear end of the truck sink surprisingly low on its wheels. The bed of the truck rocked. There was something inside.

He cybercommed Togusa. <Upstairs!>

Togusa charged up the stairs to the office above. Batou followed suit at top speed, leaping up the stairs to the second floor.

He crashed through the office door from the momentum of his leap. Just as the two men fell rolling to the floor, there was a tremendous blast as the shutter door downstairs was blown away. The floor of the office shook from the force of the explosion.

"What the—?!" Togusa shouted.

"An AI tank!" Batou shouted back.

Beyond the collection of metal planks that had been the shutter, the shape of a sentient tank with optical camo was visible in the swirling dust of the explosion.

"What do they need that thing for?" Togusa wondered.

"They're here to clean up."

The front of the tank was outfitted with two grenade cannons. Both were blasting a continuous stream of fire.

The warehouse's ceiling-high installation of cyberbrain equipment and brainwashing capsules was quickly reduced to rubble.

The men followed the tank into the warehouse and went around placing devices here and there.

C4 bombs.

"Batou!" Togusa hissed.

"They're getting ready to blow away all of the evidence."

"And us with it?"

"If we stay here."

"What do we do?"

"Luckily they haven't noticed that we're here. We can always fly off through the sky."

"The sky?" Togusa echoed.

Another explosion shook the building.

A fluorescent light fixture came crashing down from the ceiling.

As if it had just now noticed the upstairs, the AI tank turned its fire on the second floor.

"Let's go!" Batou grabbed Togusa and pulled him toward the blinded windows.

"Hey, now . . ."

"Trust me!"

Batou shattered the window glass with a single blast from his FN Highpower. The fragments glinted in the sun as they showered to the ground, revealing the outline of another optically camouflaged sentient tank and an armored suit.

Still holding Togusa, Batou stepped into the windowsill and leaped.

The warehouse across the street was twelve meters away. Its roof was ten meters higher than the windowsill.

It all happened in a split second.

They sailed through the air, with a combined weight of over two hundred kilos.

It was a stunt that only a cyborg was strong enough to pull.

Behind Batou's back, another explosion sounded. Grenade artillery from below had blown away the floor of the office where they'd stood just moments ago.

They could hear men yelling below.

With a loud thud, Batou and Togusa landed on the roof of the second warehouse. The concrete roof under Batou's feet began to crack and crumble. Togusa stumbled from the force of impact and rolled, coming to a stop just centimeters from the roof's edge.

He looked up in time to see the first warehouse crumble to the ground in a roaring blaze. The body and the brainwashing devices would all be burnt to a crisp and buried under the rubble.

Quickly, Togusa crawled on all fours to the edge of the roof.

When he peeked over the edge, he was met with a barrage of 7.62 mm fire. He pulled his head back quickly, losing a few strands of hair from the top of his head.

"What now, Big Guy? We escaped the explosion, but we're still cornered."

"They say a cornered mouse will bite a cat," Batou quipped.

He waited for the shooting to die down and then peeked quickly over the edge, firing his FN Highpower.

One of the men didn't dodge quickly enough.

The AI tank in the warehouse materialized, its grenade cannons pointed straight at them.

"Shit!"

Batou and Togusa rolled quickly to the other end of the roof.

The grenade fire hit.

Chunks of concrete danced in the air, and the edge of the roof was gone.

A siren blared in the distance. Fire trucks and ambulances were on the way.

"Is it over?" Togusa raised his head to peer over the edge

again. The hatch of the small truck was just closing. One of the men turned towards the roof, pointing his Scorpion at them. Togusa pulled his head back hurriedly.

The van and truck squealed out of the parking lot. A fire truck pulled into the vacated space, its red patrol lights lit up the warehouses.

"It's about time!" Batou remarked.

"Did you call them?"

"Yeah. The minute I saw the tank, the responsible citizen in me messaged in to report a fire. If we'd had to fight that thing off on our own, we might be damaged beyond a cyberbody replacement, no?"

"My body isn't cybernetic, remember? As long as I have the option, I'd prefer to hold onto the body I was born and raised with."

Rubberneckers gathering below began to stare up at them.

"Time for our exit, too. Now that our target's gone, there's no reason for us to stay. Besides, we need to rethink our strategy, now that the military's involved."

"True."

Togusa and Batou left the warehouse district.

A pair of sixteen-year-old eyes watched from among the flock of onlookers that had gathered to watch the warehouse burn.

Soon it wasn't just one pair. The number of eyes grew and grew.

They observed silently what was happening in front of them. Clenching their fists tightly.

Chapter 12



All of the media broadcasting programs announced that interim Middle East representative Osmal Najif had arrived in Japan to attend the Micromachine Environmental Summit.

Onsite reporters covered the story as Najif disembarked from his international flight at the Niihama International Airport and proceeded to the Niihama International Hotel, flanked on all sides by an entourage of bodyguards.

Kazei recognized one of the faces next to Najif.

It was a woman. She stuck closely to Najif's side.

It's that lady detective they call "Major."

Kazei watched the images from the hospital's dining hall. He was still in his pajamas.

Of course, her cybernetic body was a ubiquitous standard female model. Maybe it wasn't her; maybe it was just his imagination.

Kazei threw down the fork he was holding and looked at the empty food tray sitting in front of him. It had been a bland,

disgusting meal. But his body had wanted the food, even if his tongue hadn't.

If I stay here much longer, I'll wind up all healthy.

Thinking these ironic little thoughts was all he could do.

He woke up at seven o'clock and lights-out was at nine.

Because of the cyberbrain treatment program, he was unable to connect to the Net.

He was already sick and tired of the hospital's cold, sanitized ambiance.

Four days had gone by already since he had been carried in from the school's dormitory. Most of the numbness in his arms and legs had dissipated. He could already control his arms and legs enough to run and jump.

Takegawa had visited on the first day of Kazei's hospitalization, but he hadn't been back since then. Takegawa probably felt uncomfortable because he'd taken Kazei to the Dreamery that had ultimately landed him in the hospital. Besides, there was nothing about the hospital that made it a fun place for Takegawa to visit.

There weren't many young people in the Cyberbrain Neural System Ward. Kazei might very well be the only teenager who'd ever been treated there. The ward was mostly populated by elderly patients in for special neural conditions like Cyberbrain Closed-Shell Syndrome.

He was so bored.

One more day. If everything checked out in his examination the next morning, he'd be discharged. But even that felt like too long a wait.

Half of the lights in the dining hall were off, perhaps because it was almost lights-out time. Only Kazei and a handful of other bored patients stubbornly remained in the room. They had nowhere else to go. Soon, one of the nurses on her rounds would come and switch off the news. This was the nonverbal cue for them to return to their depressing beds.

"That's it!" Kazei exclaimed.

He hadn't meant to speak out loud, and he was surprised at how much his voice echoed through the dining hall. Several of the other patients turned and stared in his direction. But after a moment, they turned their gazes disinterestedly back to the news.

This place feels just like my old life.

The painful life he'd led before getting his cyberbrain. The suffocating feeling of oppression and powerlessness. The frustration of living a marginalized existence day after day.

A life in which his name, freedom, and human dignity were all withheld from him.

Everything was a big pretense—including being forced to enroll in the Technical School, supposedly to help maintain peace in his country, to make himself stronger, to learn teamwork, and so on.

And now he was sick, so he had to stay in bed. He had to eat. He had to stay calm. He couldn't run in the corridors. He couldn't make noise. He couldn't do anything. Life in the hospital was like incarceration, tightly restricted by coercion in the form of rules.

It's because you want freedom.

Out of nowhere, a boy had appeared in the seat across the table from Kazei. They'd met before.

"Where do I know you from?"

He felt like they'd known each other for ages.

"A long time ago," the boy answered.

"You have to be more honest with yourself," the boy told Kazei. "You're always repressing your emotions. You should live more truthfully. Cry when you feel like crying. Laugh when you feel like laughing. Get angry when you feel mad. It's okay to let your emotions show. It's okay for you to be yourself now."

The boy stood up and held out his hand to Kazei.

What do I want to do? Kazei asked himself. What should I do with my life? What should I believe?

"Just live according to the feelings brewing inside of you," the boy whispered.

What was brewing inside of him?

Something hot.

Something seething.

It was gathering in the pit of his stomach with no way to erupt. It felt just like magma trapped underground, accumulating more and more pressure that couldn't be released.

Kazei was bewildered by the feeling that was building inside of him.

The doctors and nurses in white who ruled the closed system that was the hospital seemed empty to him. To them, the patients were nothing but guinea pigs to experiment on and golden geese that made them money.

He was enraged by the unscrupulousness of the news reporters, blatantly adjusting their emotional reactions to the stories they covered.

They rationalized everything with words.

Even the whiteness of their shirts was loathsome.

They were trying to paint the entire world white.

Is that what you want—a world that's all white?

Don't you have other colors of your own?

Are the things you say really true?

Are you telling the truth to us?

Are the things you say true?

Who knows what truth is?

Who determines truth?

You don't decide.

It's my decision.

For me to do.

What to do.

Kazei's thoughts grew more and more fragmented. He didn't know why. All he could feel was something screaming inside his head. What should he do? He felt like he knew.

Kazei stood up. The cheap metal chair made a grating shriek against the cafeteria floor. The other patients all looked at him.

Kazei's eyes stared straight ahead.

Something was calling him.

The place he had to go to was recorded in his memory.

"I have to go," he mumbled as he left the cafeteria.

The news footage showed Osmal Najif smiling as he was welcomed with a bouquet of flowers. White teeth shone in his mouth.

The next morning, when the nurse went from room to room rousing the patients, Kazei wasn't there. His bed was empty and cold. The hospital contacted the Technical School, but they hadn't heard from him either. Runaway teenagers were hardly a rare phenomenon, and the school elected to wait a few days—a fairly common policy when a teenager disappeared “for unknown reasons.” They didn't file a missing persons report with the police.

That same day, throughout Japan, countless sixteen-year-olds disappeared from their homes for unknown reasons.

Chapter 13



The lights of Niihama's skyscrapers stretched high into the sky, sparkling like a terrestrial Milky Way. Several streams of light flowed like tributaries into this river of luminescence. It was the system of highways that tied the city together.

On one of these highways drove a black limousine. Two vans full of bodyguards drove in front of it, and two more vans followed behind. The reflections of the city lights sparkled on the limo's black windows. Behind the sparkling lights, Kusanagi's sharp gaze peered out at the city. Kusanagi and Togusa were seated on either side of Najif in the back seat of the limo.

Without looking away from the window, Kusanagi messaged Togusa.

<Did you uncover the identity of the soldiers who busted in on you in Komatsu?>

<Nothing so far,> Togusa answered, also staring away through his window.

<We examined the records but we didn't find anything. The Chief said he'd handle the military stuff himself and ordered me to cover Najif. But don't you think we're overdoing it just a little?>

At Najif's request, six identical decoy limos had each been dispatched at various intervals, each on a different route to the Niihama International Hotel. Each of the routes was blocked off to regular traffic until well after the limos had passed through. This route had been chosen randomly after taking into account traffic jams and accidents when Najif had arrived at the airport.

Kusanagi observed Najif. His deeply chiseled face showed no signs of anxiety or fear from having his life threatened, nor did he appear tired from his journey. As the Middle East's representative to the world, he projected a strong sense of dignity. He had decided to attend the dangerous summit out of devotion to his own beliefs and ideals—despite the knowledge that a ring of drug smugglers was threatening his assassination. He was gambling his life for the future of his homeland.

From what she'd heard, Najif traveled tirelessly from one Asian state to the next, campaigning to bring more micromachine companies to the barren fields of his homeland to replace the drug industry and stamp out poverty. On the one hand he seemed fearless, but at the same time he had a meticulous side that was almost cowardly, manifest in his elaborate security preparations. These were the qualities of Osmal Najif that made an impression on Kusanagi.

<Route E: All clear.>

<Route C: All clear.>

At regular intervals, encoded messages were exchanged by

security agents reporting on the status of the various routes.

<Route B: All clear.> Kusanagi issued her report.

<Route A: Speeding vehicle confirmed in oncoming lane.>

A wave of tension filled the car.

An attack.

<Route A: Speeding vehicle has crossed the median strip and is approaching from behind.>

<Route C: Speeding vehicle confirmed!>

<Route F: We've got one, too!>

The attackers appeared simultaneously on the various routes.

Kusanagi began to worry about potential danger on their route.

"Togusa! Do you see anything?"

"Nothing yet."

Just as he spoke, a ramp came into view of the limo. It was a multilevel interchange where several freeways came together. There was something happening near the guardrail of the interchange at right angles to the freeway they were on.

With a loud crash, the guardrail was bent outwards. With each subsequent collision, the rail was bent further and further.

The front of a huge oil tanker peered out from behind it.

If this continued, the tanker might plummet over the edge at any moment.

Kusanagi scanned the traffic information satellites for a report on the errant vehicle. The display in her cyberbrain told her that the tanker was filled to capacity with gasoline.

The brake lights of the vans in front of them lit up.

"Shit!" The limo driver hit his brakes, too.

"Don't stop! Drive!" Kusanagi shouted as she climbed into the passenger seat from the rear of the limo. Then, smoothly, without allowing the car to slow, she wedged her foot against the accelerator and slid her body under the driver's, changing positions with him, all the time watching the van just yards in front of her.

Kusanagi knew the goal of the Red Sands terrorists who were after Najif's life wasn't to smash Najif's limo with the tanker itself. It was a ploy to halt the limo so that they could launch the second stage of their attack.

As the limo braked, its center of gravity shifted toward its front. With the spinning back wheels pushing it forward, a slight twist in the steering wheel released the car's energy sideways, sending the limo into a spin.

For a moment, Kusanagi cut the accelerator, giving control of the limo over to its inertial navigation system. When the car was facing front again, she jerked the steering wheel in the opposite direction to regain control, then adjusted the car's direction slightly to avoid braking vans ahead.

The tires squealed loudly.

The city lights outside the windows became streaks as they streamed by, then stabilized and became points again.

She slammed the accelerator down.

Its wheels now pointing forward, the limo surged in front of the vans. It all happened in the space of an instant.

As he watched from inside the limo, Togusa's wife and children

flashed into his mind. Even so, he protected Najif to the best of his ability by shielding him with his own body—proof that he was professional to the core.

With a thundering crash, the tanker tore through the guard-rail and fell in slow motion toward the road ahead. Just a hair faster, the limo sped through the lower level of the interchange, passing underneath the falling truck.

The tanker exploded behind them. The burst of flame traveled faster than the limo, and for a moment they were enveloped in fire.

Breaking free of the fire's grasp, the limo streaked through the junction and into the city of Niihama.

The entire rear-view mirror reflected a wall of red flames.

"Togusa," Kusanagi said.

Togusa was still shielding Najif with his body.

"Huh?" When he looked up and saw the receding explosion through the rear window, he understood instantly what had happened.

Kusanagi addressed Najif. "You're safe now."

"Thank you," he said calmly, bowing his head. He looked behind them, as if to take stock of the situation, and his expression clouded slightly but he said no more. Kusanagi could tell that he was resigned to the fact that scenes of destruction and carnage would always precede and follow him wherever he went. He wore the expression of a man who knew what his path was, and was not to be swayed by sentiment.

And yet somebody wanted him dead.

At Najif's proposal, the security measures included sudden route modifications. Only the relevant security personnel were in the know.

So the enemy is an insider.

Just as the thought registered in Kusanagi's mind, multiple messages began to pour in from the other limos.

<Route B: Trouble avoided. Proceeding ahead. Please report.>

<Route C: Obstacle eliminated.>

<Route A: Obstacle eliminated, but we've been incapacitated. Request assistance.>

<Route D: Currently exchanging fire.>

<Routes F and E, please report.>

No answer.

"They got nailed," Togusa pounded his fist into his hand and gave Kusanagi a pained look.

"Stay focused. Our focus now is on getting Mr. Najif to his hotel. We have to be on guard for further attacks—"

Before she had finished speaking, Najif spoke. "I have a suggestion—"

Kusanagi looked at him.

Chapter 14



The room was small and dark.

Its ceiling was low.

A small monitor hung from the low ceiling. It broadcast the image of the blazing oil tanker. It proceeded to show a long succession of other highway accidents.

A news broadcast.

There was no sound, so it was hard to know exactly what was happening.

Osmal Najif's face appeared on the screen.

Next, they played footage of Najif entering the lobby of the Niihama International Hotel, surrounded by security agents.

"The precious lives of our companions have been lost," a pompous adult voice was saying. "But there are still opportunities. Make no mistake. At the next opportunity, we'll achieve our goal no matter what."

Kazei couldn't see who it was.

The voice echoed directly in his cyberbrain.

He felt heads nodding in the darkness in response to the voice.

Five people. Ten. No—there were more. There were many more.

"This isn't what we're trying to accomplish," the boy whispered.

He was always there now, right in front of Kazei.

Right now, he was smiling at Kazei from next to the pompous adult.

The first time I saw him, he was just ten years old. But now he looks sixteen, the same age as me. When was the first time I saw him?

He didn't really care anymore, but something deep inside him still wanted to know.

Shut up.

He thrust the voice down forcefully into the abyss of his mind. The voice faded further and further away.

That's fine, he thought.

I'll do what he tells me. That's the path I believe in, the path I'm supposed to take.

That's right. The boy nodded.

You've done well, following me. It'll be over soon. We have to do what only We can do. That's why We're here.

That's right. We nodded.

All of us are We and We are all you.

"... we will, won't we!" The pompous adult was saying something in a rapturous voice.

He's trying to incite Us.

You have nothing to do with Us. We're going to do what We want to do. Whether you say to or not, We'll eliminate Najif or whatever gets in our way. If We feel like it, We'll rub you out, too. You might need Us, but We don't need you, the boy said.

We said it, too.

All of Us.

Something was filling and flooding the small space. It was a feeling of hot excitement that made his skin tingle.

There was something black and hard and cold in his hand.

This is Our power.

This is My power.

This is the boy's power.

We just have to wait quietly for Our time to come.

Chapter 15



For the duration of the Micromachine Environmental Summit, Osmal Najif was to be the only guest in the suite rooms on the top floor of the Niihama International Hotel. At the last minute, the Metropolitan Police Department ordered the hotel to cancel all of the reservations on the next floor down, too.

The hotel lobby was swarming with security guards. Riot police outfitted in protective gear from head to foot were stationed at regular intervals all along the road between the hotel and the airport. All of them packed submachine guns and patrolled in four-man cells.

After the attacks on the highways, the police were forced to double their planned security at the hotel.

Police helicopters circled the sky above.

Kusanagi received a cybercomm from Chief Aramaki as she observed these goings-on from her room in a hotel near the airport.

<The surviving drivers and passengers of the rampaging vehicles that attacked routes A through F on the highways have been rounded up by the authorities. All of them were sixteen-year-olds born in the year 2014. Their cyberbrains contained fragmented memory. Traces of the brainwashing memory devised by our Memorist was discovered when referenced with the key code.>

<Since they were attacking Najif, I take it we can assume that the Red Sands are controlling them?> Kusanagi inquired.

<They must be, since the Memorist is dead.>

<The Red Sands cracked our routes two minutes faster than in the simulation—too fast, even accounting for a margin of error. There has to be a leak,> Kusanagi messaged.

<Yes. We have to assume that,> Aramaki agreed.

<The only parties with access to Najif's security information are the upper echelons of the police and the military and the special organs that answer directly to the Prime Minister—Public Safety Sections 1, 6, and 9.>

<Someone within one of those bodies is working with the Red Sands?>

<Apparently so.>

<Right, then. I'll have Borma and Paz thoroughly investigate the backgrounds of the relevant parties,> Aramaki said.

<Roger. Chief, how many people know that Najif is staying in this hotel now?>

<At this point, only the members of Section 9 and the Prime Minister are in the know.>

<I see. Maybe we can actually get a good night's sleep tonight.>

<Tell Najif to do that. But you and Togusa will be awake and on constant alert until Najif has arrived safely at the summit's venue.>

<Roger.>

There wasn't much concern for the comfort of the individual in this line of work, but there was something very satisfying about pushing oneself to the absolute limits amidst severe conditions. Her cybernetic body hardly experienced exhaustion, anyway. The only part of her that tired was the part of her brain that had been with her since back when her body had been flesh and blood. Even in high-tension situations, Kusanagi did her best to get enough rest to keep her brain functioning at maximum capacity.

This might be a time when she could do that.

After encountering the disturbances on the freeways, they had abandoned the plan to stay at the Niihama International Hotel at the last minute. The change had been Najif's idea.

Instead, they had chosen an airport hotel whose only selling point was its location. In terms of quality, it was two rungs down from the Niihama International. But Kusanagi was gambling on the idea that nobody would expect Najif to stay at this kind of hotel.

If Najif had been attacked at the Niihama International, where it had been widely publicized that he would be staying, it would have been all over. Since the Red Sands seemed determined to see him dead at any cost, they couldn't take any chances.

After the freeway attacks, the police had arrested fourteen new Good Morning Terrorists. This was the first time so many of them had emerged at once.

The attacks were being governed somehow.

Perhaps the Good Morning Terrorist attacks up until now had just been tests to fine-tune the brainwashing program. Since Hisamitsu Shikawa's attack, the Good Morning Terrorists seemed to have evolved into an organized group.

But if they were being brainwashed, someone had to be controlling them. The Memorist who had devised the memory that created the Good Morning Terrorists was already dead. Then who was it?

A message flashed in. It was from Ishikawa.

<Major, I've been analyzing the memories Batou and Togusa found in the boys' cyberbodies in Komatsu. Some of them belonged to Hisamitsu Shikawa.>

<Shikawa's memories?>

<Yes. The memories themselves are nothing to write home about, but they come from Shikawa and approximately thirty other boys.>

<I see. Then we can be sure that the man they found was the Memorist who'd been doing business in the Niihama cyberbrain district.>

<We've determined the man's identity. His name was Shigeru Sakami.>

<Sakami?>

<Yes. Age fifty-two. Just as we suspected, he was a former pilot of the Komatsu Air Base.>

<When did he retire?>

<November, six years ago. For "personal reasons." I looked into these "personal reasons"—it seems that a week before Sakami stepped down, his son was killed in a plane accident.>

<Satoru Sakami?>

<Yes. The boy who died in the JNA 123 crash. Age ten at the time of death. I guess Sakami was unable to go on flying after the shock of losing his son. After that, he earned money under the table working as a memorist. It looks like he poured all of it into building cybernetic bodies that looked just like his son.>

Kusanagi recalled the memory Sakami had been peddling.

It had included footage from inside an airplane.

If those events had been real, there was more to the JNA 123 crash than met the eye.

<Ishikawa. Look closely into the JNA 123 accident again and find out for certain whether or not there was a data recorder. The records say that there wasn't, but it might actually be out there somewhere.>

<Roger.>

In the cyberbrain era, airplane data collectors recorded not just audio information, but also a communications record of which satellites were used to relay electromagnetic signals broadcast by antennae, and which addresses the signals were sent to. Due to privacy considerations, only the addresses were recorded, not the content of the conversations.

Memories from the JNA 123 crash had been spliced into the memory that had turned the young Shikawa into a Good Morning Terrorist.

Even now that the memorist was dead, an imbedded whisper spurred the people whose cyberbrains had experienced that memory—especially sixteen-year-olds born in the year 2014.

Fight, it hissed.

But what were they supposed to fight for?

If their objective was shaped by the plans of the Red Sands,

who were bent on Mr. Najif's assassination, the brunt of their aggression would ultimately be turned on Mr. Najif.

But why had the military intervened?

Why had they rubbed out Sakami, the memorist?

From what Batou and Togusa had seen, Sakami hadn't resisted his attacker.

They were probably conducting a transaction of some kind.

But what had they been trading?

The answers to these questions are tied to the JNA 123 crash.

Sakami had known something that nobody else knew, something with the potential to cause a scandal that would shake the military to its core.

That's it.

Kusanagi cybercommed Aramaki to test her suspicions.

<Chief, you mentioned that someone sent a threat letter to the military. It was directed to the SDF Air Force, wasn't it?>

She stepped out into the hallway to clear her mind. In addition to Kusanagi, several other security agents were also keeping watch on Najif from a distance to avoid attracting attention.

It wouldn't be easy to pull off an assassination with this many bodyguards on patrol.

There was the possibility of a sniper attack, but Najif was extremely cautious, and he frequently changed his plans without warning. They'd had to find new accommodations for him at the last minute because he'd felt that staying at a hotel with ironclad security was as good as broadcasting his location to the world.

The swat teams stationed at the Niihama International Hotel were guarding a room whose intended occupant wasn't even there.

The ability to obtain accurate information was absolutely fundamental to a successful sniper attack. The sniper staked out his target location, and the rest was a matter of waiting. Waiting tirelessly for the singular opportunity to pull the trigger without letting one's concentration flag for a moment.

Kusanagi had concluded that, given Najif's unpredictable behavior, the threat of a sniper attack was minimal. Just in case, she had directed Saito to pinpoint the spots where a sniper might hide at locations Najif had to pass through, such as the airport and summit venue. Security agents had been stationed at each point.

If they ruled out strategies that required their target to be at a specified point, the assassins would have to use methods that targeted a wider area.

Gas. Or bombs.

Both were weapons of indiscriminate mass slaughter.

Gas was slow acting and there were a number of factors that made its effectiveness less certain. Besides, Najif wasn't stupid. He was bound to be carrying protective gear. Gas didn't seem like a likely option.

The only remaining option was that of a wholesale terrorist bombing.

Plastic explosives like the C4 bomb were malleable and could masquerade as a variety of different objects. In the right place at

the right time, their effects could be devastating. To some extent it depended on the amount of energy released by the explosion, but you could be sure of hitting your target as long as you could get within a certain range.

The bomb Shikawa had fastened to his chest had been a C4. That thing had the blasting power to reduce an entire floor of this hotel to rubble. There was no way to be sure that a bomb like that hadn't been planted at the Niihama International Hotel.

Borma was assigned to that contingency. He'd eliminated all the likely hiding places, including cars and furniture.

At this stage of the game, they had done everything they could.

Kusanagi went down to the lobby.

Everything was quiet. There were no suspicious characters in sight.

A second-rate hotel whose only selling point was its location.

There were ten more hours before their flight to Hakata for the summit tomorrow.


Right now, the fact that Najif was here didn't seem to have been leaked.

The only people who knew were Section 9 personnel and a few key members of Najif's own staff.

If there was another attack, it would probably happen at the airport.

That was what Kusanagi's ghost whispered to her.

Chapter 16



October 22, 2030

It was raining. The fine drizzle was almost a mist. The control tower of the Niihama International Airport appeared behind the curtain of rain as a gray silhouette.

The limousine's wheels sent up a spray of droplets as it sped down the freeway toward the airport. Through the backseat window, Najif watched the gray Niihama landscape stream by.

Kusanagi sat next to him.

So far, there was no indication that Najif's movements had been leaked. At this rate, they would arrive at the airport an hour earlier than planned.

On a monitor inside the limo, the news showed footage of one of Najif's doubles greeting a mob of reporters at the Niihama International Hotel.

At this very moment, someone might be preparing an attack. The risk was always there.

There was no report of anything out of the ordinary from the

bodyguards in the revamped vans driving in front of and behind the limo. It looked like they would reach the airport without any trouble.

But it was the airport that Kusanagi was worried about.

Unlike hotels, they couldn't just switch airports. There was only one.

There was the option of taking a land route, but that would leave them way too exposed to attack. They had concluded that a land route wasn't an appropriate option for transporting someone like Najif.

A cybercomm from Aramaki flashed in.

<Aramaki speaking. I've arranged for everything Najif requested. Togusa is currently standing by at the airport.>

<Roger.>

<The charter plane will depart on schedule. Is that satisfactory?>

<Yes, that's exactly what Najif requested. I suppose it was asking too much to close down the airport completely?>

<The various airlines submitted letters of protest to the government, so that was that. Apparently the Ministers of Transportation and Defense made a lot of noise.>

<I guess the financial interests of a few old fogies take precedence over our country's reputation.>

<Sadly, I'm afraid that's how it goes. Listen, if the Red Sands are planning an attack on Najif's life, it'll probably take place at the airport. Be on your guard.>

Aramaki closed the conversation. Next, Kusanagi contacted Togusa.

<Good morning, Major.>

<How are the flights looking?>

<The rain has delayed some arriving flights, but departures are on schedule.>

<What's the security status in the airport?>

<The prefectural police are reinforcing airport security at the gates and other locations, tripling the regular security forces. There's some degree of crowding since the airport will be sealed off when the charter plane takes off.>

<That's better for us, anyway. We'll arrive in about five minutes. Wait for us at the departure gate.>

<Roger.>

They were almost at the airport. Traffic was backed up somewhat by the traffic cops, but it wasn't at a standstill. The van in front of them radioed in, asking whether or not they should bypass the traffic jam.

"I want to avoid doing anything to attract attention," Kusanagi instructed them. "There's still plenty of time until the flight. We'll continue to go with the flow of traffic and then cut through to a special entrance."

They could see the charter plane that the military had arranged for Najif waiting on the runway. The government-owned, four-engine, jumbo passenger jet was used for special purposes such as transporting guests of the state and top government officials, and it was rumored to be a flying recreational facility.

Special airport security forces were visible near the plane. They were wearing assault suits and carrying submachine guns.

Kusanagi looked up at the observation tower. A surveillance

agent and a sharpshooter were standing by, poised for action.

Finally, the limousine made it out of the line of cars and turned off toward the entrance.

At the bus area in front of the airport, a group of students were gathered, probably getting ready to depart on a trip. The sign taped to the bus' front windshield read "Sword League International Friendship Match Team." The words "Good Morning Terrorists" flickered through the back of Kusanagi's mind. She messaged Togusa, who was standing by in the airport.

<Togusa, I may just be being paranoid, but I want you to investigate the student team gathered at the bus area.>

<Roger. I'll send a security squad.>

The limousine drove past the bus and in through a special entrance that was only accessible to authorized personnel.

It was still early, and inside the airport there were only scattered passengers at the arrival and departure gates.

"In approximately one hour, this area will be closed. Passengers are advised to avoid air travel if at all possible," the airport's loudspeakers announced. Here and there, businessmen, tour groups, and other passengers who couldn't take other modes of transport set their bags on benches or the floor and sat down to wait.

Luggage inspections were being conducted with three times the normal level of scrutiny, and the line leading up to them was proportionately long. As each person drew close to the front of the line, they were subjected to what seemed like an excessively tense inspection. Everyone's expression turned to one of relief when they were let through.

There were thirty minutes left until departure. They would board the plane at the very last minute. Until then, Najif was to wait in a restricted lounge. Kusanagi used the time to take stock of the airport.

<Ishikawa, what's the status of Net use in the airport?>

<I don't detect any viruses or malicious jamming signals at present.>

<Have there been any more attacks?>

<There've been a few more copycat terrorist incidents, but nothing associated with an assassination attempt on Najif.>

<I see. Continue to monitor the Net and let me know if anything comes up.>

<Roger.>

Kusanagi looked down at the lobby from the second-floor terrace.

Togusa was waiting at the luggage inspection area.

"Major, regarding the Sword League, their swords were wrapped up and checked at the baggage counter. They don't have carry-ons. I've also confirmed their identities, and there aren't any particularly suspicious subjects among them."

"I see. Maybe I'm being overly cautious."

"Are you sure you want to guard Najif all alone?"

"As long as nobody notices us, everything'll be fine. What I want to know is, where's Batou?"

Togusa pointed towards the ceiling.

"On the roof?"

"He's monitoring from the air in the Tilt. He's got three fully

armed Tachikomas with him just in case."

"That's a bit overly dramatic." Kusanagi gave a wry smile as she surveyed the lobby.

Businessmen and the student group. The lobby echoed with the voices of their families and friends who had come to see them off, filling the air with noise.

"It's too quiet . . ." Kusanagi murmured.

"Too quiet? It's pretty loud in here."

"Yes . . . maybe it's nothing, but I've got the feeling that somewhere, someone's waiting for Najif to show himself."

"With a bomb strapped to their body? Right now, everyone has to pass through a double-, maybe triple-intensity security inspection to get into the airport. The airport security staff is complaining that they've never seen the airport on such a high alert before."

"Let them complain. But even with the most stringent inspections, both human beings and machines can be fooled. Look what I snuck in without permission." She opened her coat and showed Togusa the Seburo M5 and flash grenades strapped to her waist.

"I see what you mean . . ." Togusa could only grimace.

If possible, Kusanagi would have liked Section 9 to inspect each of the passengers. But it was physically impossible. The best they could do was monitor the inspections from above and compensate for the gaps they detected in the system.

Flight information flashed on a liquid crystal display.

JNA 062 was ready for departure.

The flight went from Sapporo to Hakata, with a stopover in Niihama. Capable of speeds faster than sound, the sleek plane made the trip between Niihama and Hakata in just thirty minutes.

Najif's charter plane was scheduled to depart right after this one.

Togusa looked at the display. "Major, it's almost time."

"So it is."

"Major . . ." Togusa called after her.

"What?"

"Er . . . be careful."

Kusanagi laughed and gave Togusa a slight bow.

Why did I say that? Togusa asked himself. For some reason, he'd felt compelled to.

"Now I'm being paranoid," he muttered to himself.

Domestic commuter flight JNA 062, from Sapporo to Hakata by way of Niihama, began to idle. The shrill hum of the jumbo jet's four engines filled the airport. The plane was more than seventy meters long and could carry loads of over 270 tons—a veritable sky hotel.

It began to taxi across the tarmac toward the runway. Najif's charter plane emerged from behind it and pulled toward the gate.

The observation terrace of the airport lobby was jam-packed with reporters hoping to get a shot of Najif boarding the plane. Even for a VIP, this was an excessive amount of attention. It was clear that the press anticipated another attack like the ones that

had occurred the night before.

JNA 062 was already on the runway, ready to go.

<JNA 062, wind 236 at eight knots, cleared for takeoff.> The control tower messaged in.

The roar of turbo engines filled the airport.

As its brakes were released, the plane surged forward and became a gust of wind, blasting down the three-thousand-meter runway.

The wind lifted the plane's wings and it broke loose of gravity's pull as it bid a temporary farewell to the earth's surface. The plane veered up into the sky, its white body sucked into the blue expanse as its landing gear retreated into its belly.

That was when it happened. JNA 062 probably felt the blast, too.

Without warning, Najif's charter plane exploded in a flash of light and sound.

Immediately, a dramatic black mushroom cloud formed overhead, sending the entire airport into a state of panic.

The observation terrace became a madhouse of fleeing travelers. Some tumbled over one another on the stairs, screaming, others collapsed into tears right where they were and disappeared beneath the sea of people. It was utter pandemonium.

Togusa was right in the middle of it.

<Togusa, where's the Major?>

<Togusa, report!>

Frantic cybercomms from Batou and Aramaki flashed in.

<Najif's charter plane has exploded. Its tail end is gone.>

<Where are Najif and the Major?>

<I don't know yet. The electromagnetic waves are in complete turmoil and it's influencing our private line, too.>

Continuous gunshots rang out near the gate. Submachine guns had entered the melee.

<Gunfire is being exchanged in the area near the charter plane.>

Togusa pushed through the sea of fleeing travelers toward the window that looked out on the runway. He could see the flickering muzzle flash of submachine guns, brandished by terrorists whose faces were still softened by childhood.

<Where the hell did they come from?>

It was only a matter of time before airport security brought the terrorists under control. Togusa's concern was the safety of Kusanagi and Najif. He glanced up at the burning charter plane. It was surrounded by firefighters blasting it with a foam medium that carpeted the runway in white.

<Major. Come in, Major.>

A second huge explosion shook the charter plane. The remaining half of its body collapsed completely, crumbling into a pile of iron.

<Major!>

<I hear you.>

<Thank heavens. Where are you?>

<In the sky.>

<The sky?>

<In the first-class section of JNA 062.>

<Huh?>

○ ○ ○

Just as she'd told Togusa, Kusanagi was seated in a first-class seat on JNA 062. A tall man with Middle Eastern features and sunglasses was seated next to her, wearing headphones.

Osmal Najif.

<At Najif's instruction, we scrapped the charter-plane idea and boarded the plane that left before it, JNA 062. Right now, two prosthetic bodies equipped with my and Najif's ghost-authentication transmitters are lying in pieces in the rubble.>

<I don't remember you telling us . . . >

<Of course you don't. I didn't tell you. I only heard the plan from Najif on the way to the airport in the limo. I had no idea he had tickets for this flight. I guess you have to be pretty sharp to be a Middle Eastern Representative.>

A cybercomm from Batou cut in.

<So, you were in that jumbo that just flew off over our heads? We're coming after you.>

<Go ahead, if you think you can catch up.>

<Of course we can catch up. I can't believe you left us in the dark.>

<Even in Section 9, only the Chief and I were in on it. None of the other concerned parties know, either.>

Kusanagi looked at Najif. He smiled at her and shrugged his shoulders lightly.

It was obvious to Kusanagi that this man's caution was what had kept him alive this long.

The plane's loudspeakers broadcast the customary announcements.

The flight staff refrained from telling the passengers what had happened at the airport. They'd find out eventually, but there was no sense in causing needless panic while they were in the air. Kusanagi was glad that the pilot and crew seemed like dependable veterans.

The flight from Niihama to Fukuoka should take thirty minutes. Looks like I won't have much to do for the duration, Kusanagi thought. But still, a certain feeling plagued her.

It was like a thin, invisible layer of something enveloping her cyberbrain.

The memory of Satoru Sakami, the boy who'd appeared in the Good Morning Terrorism brainwashing dream, popped suddenly into her mind. Sakami at age sixteen.

Electromagnetic interference? Kusanagi wondered.

Let's go now, Sakami whispered.

Najif gave Kusanagi a concerned look.

Kusanagi shook her head to indicate that he shouldn't worry.

Something was going to happen. She could feel it. To make sure, she connected to the Net plug installed in her armrest. She followed the lights of information and found the airplane's database.

Normally, only the pilot and certain crew members could access the passenger list, but Kusanagi slipped past the checkpoint and pulled down the data.

Instantly, her cyberbrain displayed the information on the plane's 10 first-class seats, 50 business-class seats, and 240 economy-class seats.

There were currently 267 passengers on board.

Kusanagi had already obtained a list of the passengers who had boarded in Niihama from the android at the check-in counter. She had only to check the remaining passengers who'd boarded in Sapporo.

As she scanned the list of names, Kusanagi's eyes fell on an impossible entry.

Satoru Sakami, age sixteen.

That was exactly how it appeared on the list.

But Satoru Sakami had died in the JNA 123 crash six years ago. He was the son of Shigeru Sakami, the Memorist and former air SDF pilot, and his young life had been lost in an accident.

Was it someone else with the same exact name?

She delved deeper into the files, but everything she found simply supported the conclusion that this was the same Satoru Sakami.

Economy class, seat 32-EW.

Kusanagi disconnected from the Net and stood up.

Najif looked up at her as if to ask if something was wrong. A flicker of tension was evident in his face. Kusanagi appreciated Najif's ability to detect her uncertainty.

"There's something I want to check. I'll be right back."

Kusanagi left her seat and walked casually toward the cabin behind them, as if to ask for a beverage. She could glimpse the economy-class section through the crack in the curtain that separated it from business class.

Row 32-E. She looked for the window seat.

A teenage boy was sitting with his face toward the window.

"That boy . . ." In her surprise, Kusanagi spoke aloud.

It wasn't Satoru Sakami.

"Yō Kazei!" It was the boy from the Niihama Ground Self-Defense Forces Cadet Technical School.

"In a few moments, the pilot will transfer control to the autopilot system," the loudspeakers announced.

As soon as the announcement ended, Kazei stood up quietly from his seat.

Let's begin, Sakami's voice resonated in Kusanagi's cyber-brain.

All at once, a number of other boys who appeared to be the same age stood up from their economy-class seats.

There were eight of them in total.

The other passengers looked up at them questioningly. Immediately their expressions stiffened into masks of fear.

"EEEEEEEEK!" A woman in the economy section shrieked. The people in the front of the plane turned their heads, and they, too froze stock-still at what they saw.

The standing boys all had Glock 17s in their hands.

These Australian semi-automatic handguns had been a preferred weapon of armies and police forces worldwide. They were one of the earliest plastic-frame guns, undetectable by airport metal detectors. By now they were classifiable as antiques, but that didn't change the fact that they were a threat, more than capable of taking someone's life.

"If everyone stays quiet, we won't hurt anyone," one of the boys announced in a sickeningly calm tone. He turned toward

Kazei and nodded. Kazei showed the passengers what he was holding in his left hand.

It was a C4 time bomb.

The clock was ticking away the remaining time.

Twenty minutes.

Kusanagi tut-tutted at the situation, watching the goings-on from the shadows.

Why hadn't she gone over the passenger list sooner? Najif's surprise moves had been so successful at averting danger that she'd grown lax.

Under these conditions, it would be hard to contain eight hijackers.

What she needed now was accurate information, and the ability to communicate it to the outside. Kusanagi inserted her plug into the terminal at her side, connected to the Net, and began to gather data. Since her connectivity to external sites was limited, she began by combing through the on-plane records of ticket purchases and boarding information.

Got it. The tickets had been bought three days ago. The order had come from Sapporo.

She examined the background of the boys who were right now on their feet in the economy-class section. Like Kazei, they were probably using false names. But all of them were listed as being sixteen years old. All of their tickets had been purchased at the same time, in the same place.

It was all part of a deliberate plot.

If the person who had bought the tickets was connected to

the Red Sands, it was the same plot as had targeted Najif's charter plane.

And yet they were here now.

But Najif had only decided to take this flight today.

Was Najif really their target?

Question after question ran through her mind. But first she had to contend with the immediate situation.

Kusanagi knew that she couldn't act alone in this sort of situation.

There were eight hijackers—and those were just the ones she knew about. She couldn't take on that many opponents without paying a price.

On top of that, they weren't on the ground. They were up in the sky—on a passenger plane traveling at the speed of sound. If a bullet so much as pierced a window, there was no point in speculating what kind of damage the change in air pressure might do to the plane. Even if the hole were tiny, the loss of atmospheric pressure due to the escaping air would be devastating to the plane's human cargo.

Moreover, if the C4 went off at an altitude of thirty-thousand feet above sea level, the lower external air pressure would amplify the explosion. The explosion would probably blow away every last trace of the plane.

Kusanagi messaged Aramaki to let him know what was going on. In order not to be intercepted, she used an encrypted circuit. If someone was listening in, the message would just sound like static to them.

<Kusanagi speaking . . . >

<What's happening?>

<A hijacking.>

<What!?!>

<The hijackers' intent is still unclear. Of the arms I can confirm at this point, they have eight Glock 17s. They also have a C4. It's a group of sixteen-year-olds that boarded in Sapporo—one of them under the name of Satoru Sakami.>

<Shigeru Sakami's son, eh?>

<Yes. But the actual boy on the plane is someone else. It's Yō Kazei, a student at the Niihama Ground Self-Defense Forces Cadet Technical School. He was roommates with Hisamitsu Shikawa, the Good Morning Terrorist we apprehended.>

<Why's he there?>

<He probably saw the same dream.>

<The pseudo-memory engineered by Shigeru Sakami?>

<That's right.>

<We'll have to sit on our hands until we know what the hijackers want. We can't resort to desperate measures up there unless we have no choice.>

<Roger. I'll report again when the situation changes. I'll handle Najif.>

She cut off the message and checked on the situation in economy. Three of the boys were moving toward the front of the plane. Kusanagi hurried back to first class and whispered into Najif's ear.

"The plane has been hijacked. Try to keep your head down."

Najif started when he heard the word "hijack," but he remained cool and collected. He was well aware of his situation.

"What are the hijackers armed with?" he whispered back.

"Glocks and a C4."

"A C4?"

"It's a kind of plastic bomb."

"They have a bomb?"

"Yes. You're probably their target. Try to keep quiet and don't look up."

"Right." Najif put his feet up and hugged his knees, burying his face between them. He was glaring out from behind them as the teenaged hijackers appeared in first class.

Kusanagi sat down in her seat and watched. They had taken one of the crew members as a hostage. The passengers remained calm. There had been some hysterics in the economy seats at first, but with encouragement from the crew, the passengers were trying their best to maintain control of themselves.

Every now and then, a muffled sob disturbed the tense air.

The three hijackers had headed toward the cockpit.

They would probably take the cockpit without any trouble.

"My apologies to the passengers of JNA flight 062. The plane has been hijacked." The pilot's voice crackled over the plane's intercom.

The announcement was followed by a stunned silence.

Now they would learn what these creepy boys wanted.

Kusanagi kept a messaging channel open to Aramaki and the others. They were monitoring everything on the other side of the Net.

One of the boys addressed them in a quiet voice over the plane's intercom. "This plane is currently headed toward Hakata. However, I'm afraid that We cannot guarantee that it will land. For the time being, We hope you'll enjoy the view of Hakata from the sky."

Inadvertently, Najif lifted his head.

"*Najif.*" Kusanagi hissed under her breath.

Najif gave her a small nod and buried his face in his knees again.

One of the boys was standing diagonally in front of Kusanagi, holding his Glock. It wasn't aimed at anyone. He surveyed his surroundings attentively, and then suddenly waved the gun this way and that as if he had just remembered it.

The passengers ducked their heads below the tops of their seats, their gazes fixed on their own feet.

Only the voice on the intercom disturbed the reigning stillness.

"This message is being broadcast to ground control, too. We want every citizen in this country to hear what we want. We want disclosure of the truth. We are committing this hijacking of our own volition, towards a singular end, with a united purpose."

He spoke softly. It was the voice of a sixteen-year-old, but its complete lack of inflection gave it a chilling quality.

"Six years ago, flight JNA 123 crashed. Many of you probably still remember. The government closed the investigation after simplistically attributing the crash to a pilot's error and trouble with the aircraft due to bad weather."

There was a long pause. The silence was filled with the unmistakable feeling of a pent-up, repressed, and trembling rage.

"That day, an Air SDF interceptor plane took off at Komatsu Base. A single FA18F. Of course, no record of this remains. Then how do We know? The man who piloted the plane himself told Us the truth about what happened. And because we were on board JNA 123."

Satoru Sakami's memory.

The voice on the intercom continued.

"Six years ago, on that day, JNA 123 was hijacked. The military sent an interceptor plane to intervene. The pilot of the interceptor was ordered to destroy the airliner because the hijackers were planning to blow it up over Niihama City. The pilot obeyed. In the midst of the typhoon, his control stick shaking, he dispassionately pulled the missile trigger. As he retreated, he watched as the air-to-air missile penetrated JNA 123. In front of his very eyes, the airbus was enveloped in flames. The moment the shockwaves from the explosion reached his FA18F, he heard a voice. It was Me. It was his son's last will and testament."

Silence reigned.

The entire plane was completely still as the truth about what had happened that day was revealed for the first time.

"But none of you know about this, do you? Why is that, Mr. Sakimori? Mr. Motonari Sakimori, our current Minister of Defense, was the Air Self-Defense Force Chief of Staff at the time. My father sent a letter telling you to let the truth be known in order to keep this from happening. But instead, you responded with violence, didn't you, Mr. Sakimori? We would like you to

tell the people of this country what you did. If you refuse, We will incinerate this plane over the city of Hakata.”

All at once, the passengers began to panic.

Some screamed.

Others shouted.

The sound of stomping punctuated the uproar.

Kusanagi clucked her tongue disapprovingly.

The boys were making the worst threat possible.

So, *this* had been their aim all along.

On the day of the JNA 123 crash, it had been Shigeru Sakami's plane that had taken off from the Komatsu Base. Afterwards, he had become a memorist, selling dreams and pseudo-memories in the Niihama Cyberbrain District and spawning a legion of insensible terrorists.

This was the product that had been sold to the Red Sands, and they had successfully used it to destroy Najif's charter plane. If Najif had boarded the plane as planned, they would have achieved his assassination.

But now, instead of helping to destroy the charter plane, these boys had gathered on JNA 062 and had committed a successful hijacking.

So far, anyway.

And now they were demanding that the Minister of Defense come clean with the truth.

It was the same as Shikawa's incident.

Yes. Essentially, Shigeru Sakami, the memorist, had pulled a fast one on the Red Sands and on Sadoyama.

It had been a special forces unit under orders from the

Ministry of Defense that had shown up to destroy all evidence of the murdered Sakami and his brainwashing device at Sakami's hideout in Komatsu. Everything had been erased.

Had this been Shigeru Sakami's devising from the very beginning? Revenge for a plane crash that had taken place six years ago, as symbolized by the name Satoru Sakami on the passenger list.

The words they had just heard on the intercom—the hijackers' demands—were being relayed by ground control to the government.

<Major, can you hear me?> Aramaki messaged in. <*The Minister of Defense has sent two Air SDF interceptor planes towards JNA 062. They'll arrive in seven minutes.*>

<Even though Najif's on board?>

<Unfortunately, Najif is currently considered "status unknown" after his charter plane was blown up with him on it. The lives of the one million residents of Hakata take priority over the lives of the 267 passengers aboard JNA 062—>

The message cut out.

<Chief?>

The military had probably put up a barrier to prevent information leaks.

Another boy appeared at Kusanagi's side.

"You . . ." he trailed off quizzically.

She looked sideways at the voice's source.

It was Kazei.

"How ironic, running into you in a place like this, Yō Kazei."

"Don't Yō Kazei me!"

Something sparked inside Kazei.

Something like the prick of fury.

"Ever since the day they took Shikawa away, the day I met you, I haven't been the same! That day, I became We, and my anger has been building in order to enact Our revenge. And when the quiet seeds of Our consciousness began to awaken within me, I knew what I had to do. It's not just Me. We share the same feelings. We exist as one. We have to use Me to get revenge, to expose the truth to the world."

"Your synthesis with Satoru Sakami's consciousness seems quite advanced. Do you even believe that the anger you feel is self-motivated?"

"Don't talk like that. Even if I didn't, I want to treasure Us for accepting Me."

"You never tried to do anything on your own," Kusanagi said disparagingly. "You're just a coward, waiting for someone to change the world to suit you."

"I'm a coward?"

"You're a coward who can't even take responsibility for your own actions."

"No, I'm not!"

Kazei pulled out his Glock and pointed it at Kusanagi.

That was when it happened.

The cabin began to pitch wildly. Its floor suddenly pivoted to a slant. The plane was listing.

Kazei screamed. *"What's going on?"*

One of the hijacker boys responded. "The plane's flying itself. Someone on the outside's overriding the autopilot system."

As he finished speaking, the plane tilted even further. Screams rose up from throughout the cabin from alarmed passengers. Kazei, who had been on his feet, was thrown against a wall.

All of the hijackers had been standing in the aisles without safety restraints. The pitching of the plane knocked them off their feet.

Now the plane began to descend sharply.

Kusanagi didn't miss her chance.

Kazei was clasping the C4 in his left hand. Kusanagi blasted his wrist with her Sebro M5. When Kazei looked down, his hand had been shot cleanly off.

Just in case, Kusanagi's gun had been set to fire low-speed, soft-head bullets aboard the aircraft. These bullets were devastating to a flesh-and-blood body, and were selected more for their stopping power than the ability to penetrate.

Still gripping the C4, his hand now lay on the floor. There were less than ten minutes left on the timer.

Overcome by the pain, Kazei passed out and crumbled to the floor.

Without warning, the plane began to plummet. The interior was thrown into a state of zero-gravity.

Without missing a beat, Kusanagi kicked off against the wall and launched herself through the air toward the boys, aiming swift blows at their bodies with her fists and knees.

One after another, she knocked them unconscious before they even knew what was happening. She moved so quickly that they didn't even have the time to point their guns at her.

Kusanagi was one of the most proficient cyberbody operators in the world, and she now drew on everything she had. Her cyber-brain ordered movements that surpassed the limits of physics, and her cybernetic body responded.

One by one, the boys went limp.

It all happened in the blink of an eye.

In a matter of seconds, the boys who had been standing in the cabin had been put out of commission. There were six of them all together.

That left two.

"The cockpit."

The plane was still pitching about wildly. Before they realized what had happened, she had to suppress the two remaining boys in the cockpit and regain control of the plane. Just to be on the safe side, she ordered the passengers to take refuge in the back of the aircraft.

Her body was overheating and she was beginning to lose control over her joints. Her body was telling her that she'd exceeded its limits.

Unsteadily, she staggered towards the cockpit.

Najif stood up in front of her.

"Let me help. There are two of them. If we both go, we'll stand a better chance."

"Thank you, Mr. Najif." He was the VIP she was supposed to be protecting, but if the plane crashed, all would be lost anyway. Kusanagi and Najif made their way up the swaying aisle toward the cockpit.

The door was wide open.

The boys were gripping the control sticks, trying to bring the runaway plane back under control. The pilot and copilot were already dead. Probably the boys had suspected them of deliberately sabotaging the autopilot system. They weren't professional terrorists, after all. These were Good Morning Terrorists, their actions governed only by wrathful urges.

Both boys were completely absorbed in trying to operate the controls. They didn't even notice Kusanagi and Najif peering into the cockpit. Kusanagi signaled Najif to back her up, handing him a stray Glock she had retrieved. Najif took the gun and followed her lead.

Kusanagi crept up slowly behind the boys, extending a cable and stabbing it into the plug in one of the boys' necks. Immediately, she washed in a command to freeze his cyberbrain. She pushed the boy's body aside, and he fell limply out of his chair. All of this was accomplished in the time it took her to creep into the cockpit.

The remaining boy went limp in Kusanagi's powerful arms.

"It's over," Kusanagi told Najif, turning around to look at him.

A sudden shock jolted Kusanagi's arms and legs. Automatically, she drew her Sebro M5 but it was blown out of her hands.

The Glock in Najif's hands was spurting a continual stream of fire. She didn't even have a chance to fire back. Kusanagi crumbled to the ground like a broken doll.

Najif looked down on her. "None of this went according to plan," he murmured.

"Najif—"

He delivered a savage kick to her stomach, sending her body flying out of the cockpit and into the first-class area.

Kusanagi watched him.

Najif sat down in the cockpit and grasped the control stick.

"The plane was supposed to be hijacked by the Red Sands and rerouted toward the continent according to the hijacker's demands. Osmal Najif, the Middle Eastern Representative, was supposed to be kidnapped and released for a handsome ransom. That was the plan. And now look. I've been completely wrangled by the man who was supposed to arrange the terrorists."

The pitching and swaying of the plane gradually subsided and its flight became stable again.

"When the hijacking took place, I re-wrote the autopilot program just in case." Najif said as he canceled his own program.

They had dropped from an altitude of twenty-three-thousand feet to just eight-thousand feet.

"So, you wanted to make an amazing comeback from the Red Sands' attempt to wipe you out," Kusanagi said. "You were behind the Red Sands the entire time."

"The Red Sands needed a strong adversary in order to raise their stock. It's easy to invent an enemy. Some members of the Red Sands really were after my life. It's thrilling work," he told her.

Still on the floor, Kusanagi looked around her.

Kazei was on the floor, unconscious.

A cybercomm flashed into her brain.

<What's going on, Major?>

<Batou, it's you.>

<Yeah. It took me a while to make a hole in the military's destabilizing barrier.>

<What's your position?>

<I'm looking straight up at the ass of the plane you're on. What happened?>

<Najif was in cahoots with the Red Sands. He's piloting the plane right now. I can't move my body at the moment. The only thing I can move a little is my left arm. Batou, I want you to take over this airplane.>

<How? I can't board it from the outside. It's impossible.>

<I'll take out the door on the side of the plane.>

<But you can't move.>

<There's a way.>

She looked at Kazei. He was collapsed in the aisle by the door of the plane, unconscious from pain.

She used all of the strength in her left arm to give her body a push and roll it towards Kazei. Then she extracted a cable from her neck and plugged it into his.

"Uh."

For a brief moment, Kazei's pale face turned toward her as she established a link between Kazei's cyberbrain and her own. She wasn't hacking his brain—she was forcibly taking it over so she could use his arms and legs as her own.

She assumed command of his cyberbrain, and in that instant, Kazei became Kusanagi. Of course, his own mind was still present, too.

Inside Kazei's cyberbrain, he touched Kusanagi's raw consciousness.

<What do you think you're . . . > he demanded.

<Take matters into your own hands and change the future. If you don't . . . >

Kazei picked himself up off the ground. In front of him, Kusanagi lay like a lifeless doll. She had transferred all of her consciousness into Kazei's body. There was a chance that when she left, Kazei would experience side effects of some kind. But this was no time to worry about that.

A message from Batou flashed in.

<Major, I'm perched on the outside of the plane next to the door in a Tachikoma. I'm ready when you are.>

Kazei smashed at the release button on the airtight door with his remaining hand. He broke through the protective glass cover and hit the button. The door fell away, whizzing off into the sky.

Kazei's body was sucked towards the void. He grabbed a pipe next to the right side of the door and held on tightly. Next to him, however, Kusanagi's body blew right out of the plane. The cable in Kazei's neck was yanked loose, and he watched as Kusanagi's body spun off into the distance.

"Oh!" he exclaimed.

"Major!" a voice shouted outside the plane. Something blue leaped after Kusanagi.

"That woman!" a voice said behind Kazei.

It was Najif. He'd learned in the cockpit that the emergency door had been opened.

Through the open door, a gun fired into the plane at Najif. The shot blew a patch of skin off his head, exposing his titanium brain case. But Najif only stumbled backward two or three steps.

"Shit! Looks like low-speed bullets won't take him down." Batou, the lens-eyed man, leapt into the plane and faced off with Najif. He wore stun knuckles on his fists.

"Let's go," he said, stamping the ground.

Kusanagi watched the ground get closer and closer as she plummeted through the air.

Even her titanium skull wouldn't survive an eight-thousand-foot fall.

This is it, she thought.

<Ma-jor!> a message flashed into her cyberbrain. <To your right!>

Kusanagi looked to her right. A Tachikoma was diving through the air. It had let Batou off on the plane and flung itself after her.

The Tachikoma launched a liquid wire toward her from the vent in its external pod. The wire caught Kusanagi's body mid-air and the Tachikoma pulled her in.

<I've secured the Major!>

<Roger!> A tiltrotor swept toward them. A Tachikoma perched on its main wing.

It waved at Kusanagi.

Kusanagi watched the entire thing.

Batou's arm was twisted and broke in two with a sickening crunch. A brutal blow shook his body. He fell to the floor,

doubled over at the midsection.

It was a one-sided battle. Najif's martial arts skills were far better than Batou had expected.

"Shit! I never saw any documentation of this!" Batou complained.

"Of course not. Nobody knows my past but me."

Najif stomped his heel savagely at Batou's face, but Batou rolled deftly out of the way. The floor buckled where Najif's foot hit.

Batou tried to sweep Najif's feet out from underneath him, but Najif crouched low and caught Batou's legs.

"Shit!" Batou cursed.

Najif grasped Batou by the feet and swung the enormous body. Batou went flying through the air, mowing down the first-class seats in his path. He was headed straight toward the gaping door.

The sky opened up to swallow him.

"ARGH!!" Batou reached out his right arm and grabbed the railing next to the door. Najif thrust the C4 bomb into the immobilized Batou's pocket.

"Here's a little present. It should go off soon," he said.

"Thanks, but I'm good, really."

"Hmm. I know low-speed bullets can't do much damage to a cyberbody like yours, but what about just a finger?" Najif mused.

He blew Batou's index finger off with his Glock. A sadistic smile spread across his face.

So, this was the kind of man he really was.

Laughing, Najif continued to shoot off Batou's fingers.

His middle finger was next.

When his middle finger and third finger were gone, Batou felt himself barely able to keep himself from being sucked out the door. His hand began to open.

"Bye-bye," Najif said, aiming his Glock one last time. Just then, something launched into him, knocking him back.

It was Kazei.

"You little—"

During the split second when Najif's attention was distracted by Kazei, a barrage of fire spat into the plane through the open door. It pierced Najif's arms and legs.

A Tiltorotor was flying alongside JNA 062.

A Tachikoma was perched on top. The machine gun in its manipulators blasted a constant stream of fire in Najif's direction, making him dance. The high-speed armor-piercing shells made a large hole in the other side of the plane as they destroyed Najif's body, pushing him further and further back. Just as he was about to fall through, Najif grasped the edge of the plane and held on.

Batou, now back inside, crammed the C4 into Najif's jacket pocket.

"You can have this back."

He dealt Najif a powerful kick, sending him flying off into space.

The Tachikoma blasted him with machine-gun fire, detonating the C4.

A flower of flame bloomed in the sky.

The Tachikoma's rear hatch opened, and Kusanagi peeked out.


"Bye-bye!" she called. The eight-thousand-foot-altitude wind blew through Kusanagi's hair.

Batou smiled at her from the passenger plane.

An Air SDF interceptor plane flew past.

<This is Kusanagi of Public Safety Section 9. The hijackers have been contained. Over and out.>

Chapter 17



The plane left a white line in its wake as it traversed the blue expanse.

Kusanagi and Aramaki watched from the roof of Public Health Section 9.

"Is your body all fixed?" he asked her.

"Yes."

"Minister of Defense Sakimori tendered his resignation. It's being attributed to the exposure of the cover-up surrounding the JNA 123 crash six years ago."

"Sakimori ordered the cover-up," Kusanagi told him. "They've also uncovered evidence that he planned the assassination of Omuro, his opponent. I just heard the news from Paz and Borma."

"I hear they uncovered a secret data box as well?" Aramaki asked.

"Yes. Apparently it was discovered in the possession of a certain Dreamery that Sakami had dealings with. When Sakami

brought down the JNA 123 with own son on board, Satoru Sakami sent him his last wishes electronically. The shock of it led him to quit the military, and he concocted the Good Morning Terrorist scheme for his own personal self-interested reasons: to get revenge on Sakimori. At this point, we can only assume so, anyway. But I'm not convinced that all of the teenagers that were subjected to the Good Morning Terrorist memory were completely in the thrall of Sakami's brainwashing device. It seems more likely to me that it was their own displeasure with society that ultimately caused them to resort to terrorism."

"Now that you mention it, you watched the brainwashing memory, too, didn't you, Major?"

"Yes. The brainwashing memory itself doesn't cause rage. The rage bubbles up from deep within a person's mind, like seething magma."

"In other words, in our society, anyone is a potential terrorist. That should keep us busy."

"Isn't it our job to see to it that that doesn't happen?"

"That it is."

A white sheet flapped in the wind, briefly exposing a glimpse of blue sky.

It all seemed like such a long time ago.

Various things were missing in Kazei's mind. He could feel it. Several memories were gone. They'd replaced the left hand he'd lost with a cybernetic one. But there was no replacing his lost memories.

If you wanted things to change, it wasn't enough just to

wait around. Someone else wouldn't change things. You had to change. If that didn't work, you had to make things change yourself.

If his memories were gone, he would have to make new ones.

Take matters into your own hands.

He felt like he understood now.

Kazei gazed up at the blue sky above.

Afterword

Junichi Fujisaku

It was June 5, 2001.

We were wrapping things up on the *Blood The Last Vampire* novel, and I went to Production I.G executive producer Mitsuhi-sa Ishikawa to tell him that I was going to see Katsuya Terada, who had done the cover illustration for us.

I still remember how Ishikawa telephoned Yuichiro Matsuka, who had just become a producer, and half-forced him to include me on the screenplay team, based on a comment by Mamoru Oshii that it was time for me to do more writing.

The next day was Wednesday, June 6th. It was raining outside. That afternoon, I met the *Stand Alone Complex* director Kenji Kamiyama and the screenplay team for the first time.

The rest of them were already professional writers, and I was just a game designer. I knew I would just have to really throw myself into my work, and I spent most of my time writing even after I went home at night.

I worked on Saturdays, too. My days were filled with reading books and writing scripts.

Two years later.

The entire first season has been successfully released on DVD, and by the time this book is published, the TV broadcasts will be in progress. This book's publication might actually coincide with the broadcast of the episodes I wrote.

I won't go into detail about those episodes here, but they begin with episode six of the first season.

"Assassination Duet" was a very memorable episode for me, and when the script was done, I still felt I had more ideas left. Rather than rewriting the episode, I decided to write the memory-themed story in the form of an additional episode.

If you read this book and develop an interest in *Stand Alone Complex*, I highly recommend that you watch the television series that is its base. If you'd like to enjoy more cyborg action, I hope you'll play the game version. It should be released around March 2004.

I pray, dear readers, that we will meet again, and until that day I will labor intensively to bring you more stories.

December 2003

Written at the author's home

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.

About the cover artist

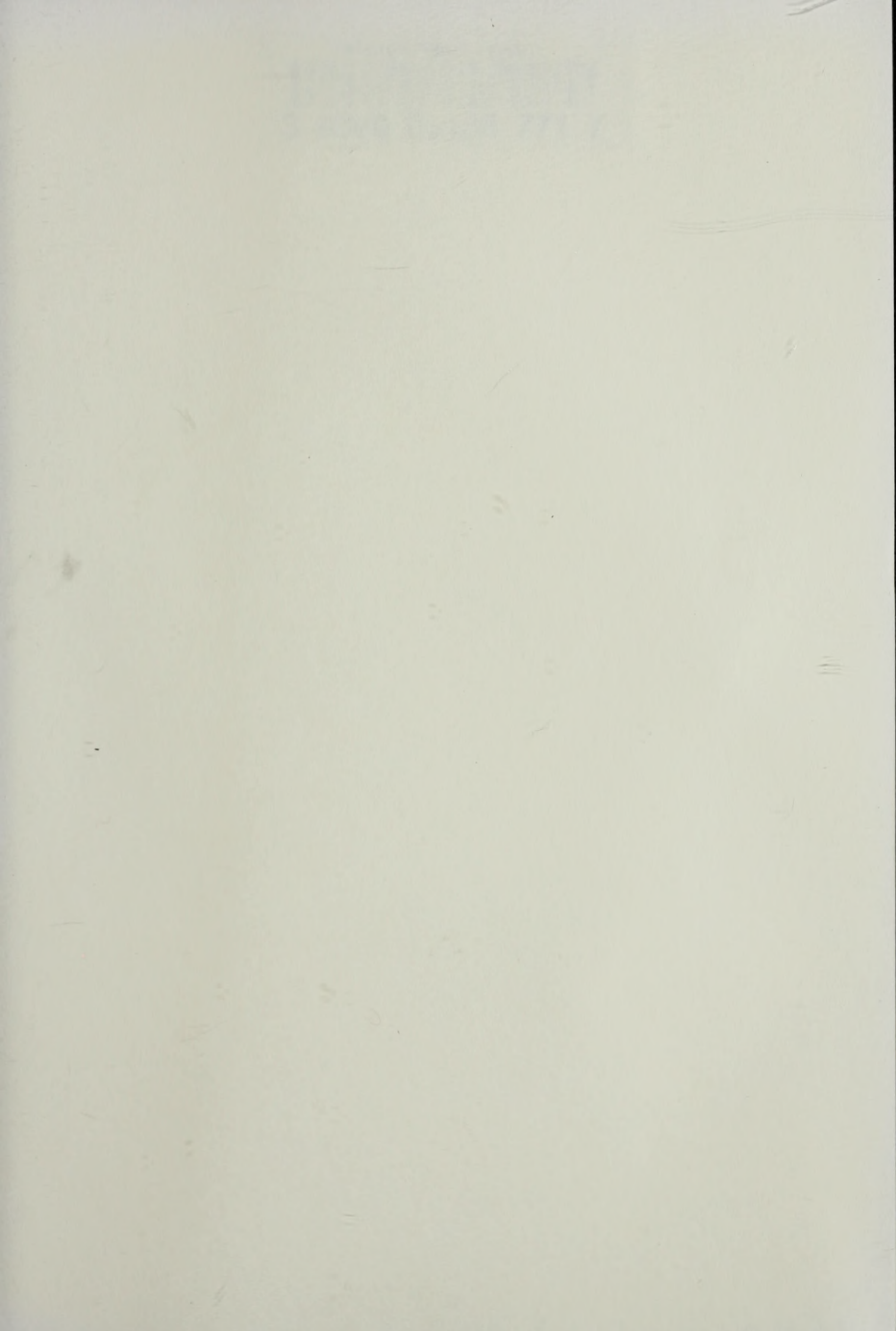
Born March 4, 1968 in the Niigata Prefecture, KAZUTO NAKAZAWA is an animator and illustrator. His major works include character design on *El Hazard: The Magnificent World*; *Legend of Black Heaven*; *Ashita no Nadja*; and *Samurai Champloo*. He also directed the anime portion of *Kill Bill* Volume 1, and was the key animator of "A Detective Story," a short film in *The Animatrix*.

About the author

The author of this book is a well-known and respected figure in the field of [illegible]. He has spent many years studying and writing about [illegible]. His work has been widely cited and his books have been translated into several languages. He is currently a professor at [illegible] University, where he teaches [illegible]. He is also a frequent speaker at conferences and seminars on [illegible]. His research interests include [illegible]. He has received several awards and honors for his contributions to the field. He is married and has two children. He enjoys reading, hiking, and listening to classical music. He is a member of the [illegible] Society and the [illegible] Association. He is also a volunteer at the [illegible] Museum. He is a very dedicated and hardworking person who is always striving to learn more about his field. He is a very friendly and approachable person who is always willing to help others. He is a very successful and accomplished person who is a true role model for many people. He is a very kind and generous person who is always willing to share his knowledge and experience with others. He is a very intelligent and thoughtful person who is always looking for new ways to improve himself and his work. He is a very motivated and driven person who is always striving for excellence. He is a very confident and assertive person who is always willing to stand up for his beliefs. He is a very creative and innovative person who is always looking for new ideas and solutions. He is a very organized and detail-oriented person who is always making sure that everything is done correctly. He is a very patient and understanding person who is always willing to listen to others. He is a very calm and composed person who is always keeping his cool. He is a very honest and straightforward person who is always telling the truth. He is a very loyal and committed person who is always standing by his friends and colleagues. He is a very responsible and reliable person who is always doing his best. He is a very hardworking and dedicated person who is always putting in his best effort. He is a very successful and accomplished person who is a true role model for many people. He is a very kind and generous person who is always willing to share his knowledge and experience with others. He is a very intelligent and thoughtful person who is always looking for new ways to improve himself and his work. He is a very motivated and driven person who is always striving for excellence. He is a very confident and assertive person who is always willing to stand up for his beliefs. He is a very creative and innovative person who is always looking for new ideas and solutions. He is a very organized and detail-oriented person who is always making sure that everything is done correctly. He is a very patient and understanding person who is always willing to listen to others. He is a very calm and composed person who is always keeping his cool. He is a very honest and straightforward person who is always telling the truth. He is a very loyal and committed person who is always standing by his friends and colleagues. He is a very responsible and reliable person who is always doing his best. He is a very hardworking and dedicated person who is always putting in his best effort.

About the cover artist

The cover artist of this book is a talented and experienced professional in the field of [illegible]. He has worked on many projects and has a strong portfolio of work. He is currently a senior artist at [illegible] Studio, where he works on [illegible]. He is also a frequent contributor to [illegible] Magazine and [illegible] Journal. His work has been featured in many galleries and museums. He is a very skilled and creative person who is always looking for new ways to express himself. He is a very hardworking and dedicated person who is always putting in his best effort. He is a very successful and accomplished person who is a true role model for many people. He is a very kind and generous person who is always willing to share his knowledge and experience with others. He is a very intelligent and thoughtful person who is always looking for new ways to improve himself and his work. He is a very motivated and driven person who is always striving for excellence. He is a very confident and assertive person who is always willing to stand up for his beliefs. He is a very creative and innovative person who is always looking for new ideas and solutions. He is a very organized and detail-oriented person who is always making sure that everything is done correctly. He is a very patient and understanding person who is always willing to listen to others. He is a very calm and composed person who is always keeping his cool. He is a very honest and straightforward person who is always telling the truth. He is a very loyal and committed person who is always standing by his friends and colleagues. He is a very responsible and reliable person who is always doing his best. He is a very hardworking and dedicated person who is always putting in his best effort.





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