

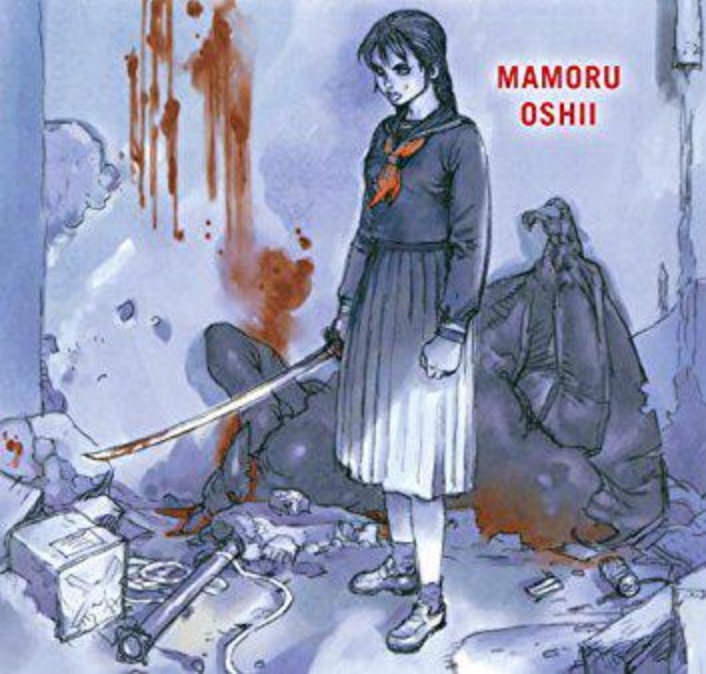
An original novel inspired by the hit film
from the director of GHOST IN THE SHELL

BLOOD

THE LAST VAMPIRE

— NIGHT OF THE BEASTS —

MAMORU
OSHII



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MAMORU OSHII

ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY
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BLOOD THE LAST VAMPIRE: NIGHT OF THE BEASTS

KEMONO TACHI NO YORU BLOOD THE LAST VAMPIRE

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In our memories, the reality we believe we've experienced is inevitably mixed with illusion. Whether real or imagined, it is only in retrospect that we can ever comprehend the meaning of our recollections.

Had he really seen it? Or had he merely convinced himself that he had as he sifted back through his memories? For a long time, these questions plagued him.

The image, offset by a spray of blood and an animal stench, was simply that of a young girl's white face illuminated in the obscurity, her large eyes peering at him. Eyes like blue flames flickering in the shadows.

It wasn't until much later that he realized those eyes had been the eyes of a beast.

— EYEWITNESS —

The road had been doused in water but the flames from the firebombs burned on, reflecting off the wet pavement and casting a red glow on the freeway overhead.

Wearing matching helmets to indicate their faction, a group charged through the streets as firebombs unleashed new waves of flames in their path. With each conflagration, a stir rippled through the crowd gathered on the sidewalk, the waves of people undulating.

April 28, 1969

All over the city, fierce clashes broke out at train yards and major intersections between groups of student laborers who called themselves the Anti-Yoyogi Faction and the riot police attempting to contain them. The riots started in the early afternoon. Students attacked and set fire to a police box near the university where they were based and declared various liberated zones by erecting barricades in the main avenues. They raged against the riot police sent to suppress them, answering the gas canisters launched at them with volleys of rocks.

Even when night fell, the situation showed no signs of quieting. The students managed to take over a number of public train and subway stations, putting a halt to both services. Deprived of their transport home, throngs of people overflowed into the streets, some of whom sought to join the mayhem. They transformed into roving mobs. In the agitated atmosphere of the capital, aimless swarms of people pooled here and there, or drifted about in search of fresh action.

That night, Rei was among the mobs.

Already, fifteen minutes had passed since the group of two hundred people Rei was with had sat themselves down in the lane closest to the sidewalk in a broad, eight-lane thoroughfare.

When they'd departed from the park that had been the meeting place, the group had formed a procession with more than twenty people in each row. At first, they numbered more than four thousand. But, as they'd deviated from their plotted course, the line stretched out and broke into a number of smaller groups, and it had become difficult to ascertain their relative positions.

The term "demonstrators" was used to refer to a wide variety of protesters, each with very different levels of intent and commitment, ranging from moderates with families in tow—marching a course duly approved by the relevant authorities—to the volatile element known as armed insurgents. However, when it was understood that the authorities intended to control a demonstration, the structure and procedure governing the protest had to follow a standardized format defined by empirical principles.

In order to protect the group from being split, its members banded together in tight rows, and these rows were lined up to form a long, rectangular procession. The dimensions of the rectangle varied depending on the scale of the protest, but, taking into account the limited visual range of the people in the rows, they were best limited to a width of six to eight people. If the procession was too long, it ran the risk of being severed by the riot police. Because of this, the group was best arranged in blocks of two hundred marchers.

Flag bearers were positioned at the front of the formations, led by a protest director whose role was to direct the group. However, when the group was structured in a tight formation, such as a zigzag demonstration, the marchers could often see little more than the backs of the people in front of them, and were completely unable to hear the voice of the protest director. Thus, several subdirectors would be positioned along the sides of the procession, and it was their role to control and maintain the formation by shouting, screaming, pushing, and pulling. The subdirectors were like sheepdogs herding a flock of sheep, or cowboys managing a herd of cattle.

Of course, the protesters occupying these leading positions were likely to be the very first arrested, and therefore they had to possess a certain resolution—they had to be prepared to be locked up. The flag bearers in particular were often thought to be carrying arms, and so the physical risk that accompanied their role was a significant price to pay for their glory.

Moreover, when planning the structure of a demonstration, the director had to take into account not only the marchers'

resolve, but also various physical considerations. The positions on the outside edges were most vulnerable to the physical tactics of the authorities—punches, kicks, shoves, and other such acts of corporal aggression—and were therefore best occupied by men with sufficient strength and stamina. Women and less able-bodied protesters would be positioned in the interior of the formation or toward the back. If the demonstration contained a large number of inexperienced members, the leader needed to council them on how to respond if they were arrested and on how to flee if the need arose. The leader also had to manage the group's energy level by leading chants and rally cries.

When the protesters were members of a partisan faction, particularly when they intended to stage an armed struggle, everything changed. The resolve of the protesters was more than a prerequisite to their participation—it was mandatory. As a result, the director was mainly concerned with the physical considerations and strategic requirements necessary for the group to accomplish its goals.

The members of these groups underwent strategic training at university-based headquarters in how to stay in formation, and they learned sophisticated group maneuvers such as the whirlpool-style demonstration. If need be, they wouldn't hesitate to take up two-by-fours and iron pipes, or throw rocks and Molotov cocktails. The flag bearers were many and they occupied a distinct position at the front of the mob.

Political groups throughout history, whether leftist or rightist in ideology, have shared an affinity for advancing amid a proud forest of flags; for these partisan groups, however, the flags were pure display. At the command to roll

flags, the flag bearers and the marchers behind them would brandish the huge flagpoles and advance like a battalion of foot soldiers with spears at the ready. They weren't easily stopped, even by a fully armed riot squad.

The rebels in the streets took their orders from higher political organizations, which in turn were steered by special committees. In addition to the fighters, there were personnel in charge of surveillance, communications, and logistics. There were even teams that provided legal support to those taken into custody.

These groups of fighters were aided by various supporting organizations and had decision-making bodies in their upper echelons. They met the minimum requirements of what could be called an army, and, in fact, certain political factions didn't hesitate to publicly recognize them as military organizations, the seeds of eventual partisan armies.

In other words, while these groups had the appearance of random assemblies, thrown together at the meeting place that day, they were in fact something very different. The group Rei was with, by contrast, was a truly random assembly.

The nonpartisan groups in the large-scale demonstrations known as unified movements often consisted of individual protest committees of students or laborers organized at universities or workplaces, and these committees were banded together by united-front organizations. Usually, meetings were held before an event to plan the composition of the protest formation.

When it came to high school students, only a paltry number from each individual school participated, and there was no lateral organization unless they fell under the auspices

of a partisan faction. Such groups usually wound up merely latching on to other formations at the place of assembly.

Rei belonged to the Tokyo K High School Democratization Protest Committee. Even after efforts to recruit the maximum number of sympathizers, the group had fewer than twenty members. Forming their own independent protest body was an unattainable dream. And today, with various partisan factions and united-front organizations having declared an armed uprising, they were left with only seven or eight members—more a handful of individuals than an actual group.

The members of Rei's group had gathered at the train station of a nearby town after school. They'd stopped by an apartment they'd rented under the name of an activist friend to equip themselves with flagpoles and helmets before setting out. Unlike the partisan troops, they lacked the audacity to wear their helmets openly on the trains, and they cheered almost inaudibly whenever they caught sight of the rebels occupying a platform through the train windows. In this fashion, they arrived in the city center.

That day, there were various assemblies being held in the city, each staged by groups with differing political views. Rei and his compatriots had chosen to attend one that was sympathetic to the Anti-Yoyogi Faction, but, while Rei's group didn't explicitly oppose the faction's policy of armed struggle, they themselves abstained from the use of violent tactics. The political factions called such demonstrators petit-bourgeois citizens groups, meaning it as an insult.

The park where they gathered was swimming with helmets of varying colors, patterns, and slogans, a wide

assortment of flags, and unintelligible battle cries distorted by cheap megaphones.

At first, Rei was daunted by the chaos surrounding him. But when he donned his helmet and assembled his flag, which had been broken down into sections for the trip, his spirits began to soar.

He smoked a cigarette, scanning the neighboring groups. Suddenly, a number of similar-looking groups began to come together as if drawn by a magnet. Representatives from each gathered around a man who looked like the chairman of a citizen's group, and, after a short conference, they began to organize the mob into a formation. The person designated as protest director was a gentleman in a black helmet, the leader of a group of twenty or so that called themselves the Insubordination League.

The gentleman in the black helmet was jostled to his feet. "How long are we going to just sit here?" A man in a white helmet that said JAPAN PRO-WRESTLERS had grabbed hold of him.

"What's the plan?" a man with a red helmet printed with the word ANNIHILATION chimed in.

The protesters had obeyed the command to sit down, but nobody really understood what was happening and they were becoming restless. The crowd turned an eye to this new development with a mixture of hopefulness and exhaustion.

"What's going on? What are we waiting for? Explain!"

"Crowd control has set up an arrest line just ahead. The leaders of each formation are meeting to figure out how—"

“Meeting? You’re having a meeting without explaining anything to us? What about our initiative, huh?”

“That’s *boss negosh!*”

Boss negosh stood for “boss negotiating,” and “boss bargaining” was also shortened to *boss barg*. The terms originally referred to union leaders taking it upon themselves to independently negotiate with management executives or bigwigs—so-called boss politics—and, to the nonpartisan types, there was nothing more despicable. Rei had never claimed strong democratic ideals, but he had frequently witnessed partisan faction members concocting this kind of deal, and he felt that the mere existence of terms like intraparty democracy spoke volumes about the true nature of such organizations.

On the other hand, Rei was displeased with the JAPAN PRO-WRESTLERS man for bringing up this kind of debate during a time of confusion. Not to mention the tagalong ANNIHILATION man.

Should they advance, or change course? Changing course would be no mean feat with such a large group to lead, and there could very well be new dangers lurking ahead. Still, there was something terribly passive about just sitting there and waiting.

The situation was unstable, and information was in short supply. Situations like these put a leader’s abilities to the test, but the leader of the group Rei had joined, the man in the black helmet, seemed well versed in inter-organizational matters but lacking in the decisiveness required of a field commander. Unfortunately, this capacity was common in members of partisan factions and their soldiers, but there

was a decided absence of it in the nonpartisan stratum to which Rei belonged.

Although it was April, the nights were quite cold. The asphalt road Rei was sitting on felt like chilled iron.

Rei was hungry. He had already finished off the rolls he had brought as an emergency snack back at the meeting place.

More than anything, he was fraught with worry over the idea that the longer they sat here, the more disengaged they would become.

"Let's advance! If we don't move forward, how can we figure out what's going on?" JAPAN PRO-WRESTLERS had deemed the director unfit for command.

ANNIHILATION was quick to agree, and other voices of assent rose up from the crowd.

"Wait a minute! There are people here who don't want any trouble. The idea is to risk as few arrests as possible—"

The protests of the man in the black helmet were interrupted by a sudden shout from the back of the group.

Rei quickly rose to his feet and was met with the sight of several dozen men charging full speed down the center lane of the avenue.

Red with a white stripe down the middle: their helmets indicated that the men belonged to a militant group called the Mohicans, which was known above all for its fierceness. Nearly all of them were armed with iron pipes, and some carried what appeared to be firebombs. Without a word, the men raced past Rei's group and disappeared into the darkness, leaving a cloud of ferocity in their wake.

It was an oddly moving sight to Rei.

He felt something well up inside his chest, and, unable to contain himself, he sprang into action. He jumped over the guardrail, landing on the sidewalk. He lifted up one of the concrete slabs that covered the gutter and slammed it down against the pavement. The nearby spectators scattered, panicked, as the slab broke easily into several pieces. Rei selected several good-sized chunks and stuffed them into the pockets of his jacket. Then he seized one of the larger pieces and slammed it down again.

Several men sprang up from the crowd as if propelled by an unseen force, joining Rei on the sidewalk and helping him to break the concrete apart. In no time, the pile of concrete chunks grew into a small mountain.

Rei hadn't intended to incite the crowd to take action, but as he became absorbed in the simple act of making missiles, the terrible feeling of uneasiness disappeared without a trace. He even felt a strange feeling of liberation, as if surmounting some sort of barrier.

If the time comes, am I prepared to use these? Rei asked himself, as he felt the sharpness and weight of the concrete fragments in his hand.

He knew the horror of stoning—not just as an abstract concept, but from having witnessed the act several times. Students and laborers held no monopoly on rock throwing. Though officially forbidden, the riot police would launch rocks back at their attackers. Rocks the size of fists littered the streets. Car windshields hit by a direct throw would shatter instantly, and their hoods would crumple like paper.

It was impossible to see the trajectory of the rocks in the darkness, making their psychological impact enormous.

With no warning whatsoever, a rock could hit you, smashing a body part, shattering bones. The riot police were protected by reinforced-resin helmets and duralumin shields, but to advance into a torrent of flying rocks was beyond courageous—it was pure recklessness. In the past, a number of officers had been killed that way.

Firebombs might look impressive, but, when compared to rock throwing, rocks were far more fearsome. This was evidenced, too, in conflicts and civil wars taking place all over the globe. Faced with soldiers armed with guns, the ancient tactic of throwing rocks was consistently the preferred means of resistance.

When it came to the issue of political violence, Rei considered it hypocritical to passively condone the practice through “not condemning it”. At the same time, while it was thrilling to talk about armed struggles and revolution by force, Rei also had a deep-rooted aversion to violence. He was absolutely opposed to a person, any person, being injured through meaningless violence. He found the idea of hurting someone with his own hands even more unbearable. His dislike of violence and pain, however, was a personal limitation, and he considered it an irredeemable weakness.

His aversion to violence needed to be overcome. He even felt that quelling it was his duty as a revolutionary. However, at least in Rei’s view, this didn’t mean he bought into the idea of “personal evolution through historical revolution,” or any of the propaganda touted by the members of the political factions.

The thing Rei despised most of all was the injustice of people who tolerated the wrong doing of others, ultimately

becoming complicit in it out of the fear of dirtying their own hands. The self-restraint that Rei and his cohorts often referred to, however, actually amounted to something very similar—what the members of the political factions would call the limitations of the *petite bourgeoisie*.

In fact, a friend of Rei's who belonged to one of the radical partisan factions had delivered the following trenchant criticism: "What you're doing isn't politics; it's literature." This was why Rei couldn't trust the members of the partisan factions, but still ...

Tonight he would throw the rocks, he told himself. Voluntarily harming another person was irrevocable, but that was exactly why it was necessary, Rei thought. The only way human beings evolved was by forcing themselves to evolve, creating circumstances that were irrevocable. Or at least, in Rei's estimation, that was the kind of situation he needed. It was also possible that the strange atmosphere that night had simply created this illusion in Rei's mind, but this possibility didn't occur to him.

In fact, Rei would indeed cross a point of no return that night, but it would happen in a way completely unforeseen to him, through a chance encounter.

Dissolution was sudden. The cataclysmic forewarning from the darkness ahead was transmitted like a ripple running from the front of the procession to its rear. As the ripple moved through the crowd, each person's face took on an identical expression.

First, they heard the far-off but unmistakable sound of a teargas gun being fired. It made a distinctive sound, like

that of an impact. Next, the sound of footsteps echoing on asphalt mounted to a deafening volume.

"They're coming!" someone screamed.

The mob sprang to its feet. A woman shrieked; perhaps she had been smashed between the guardrail and the throng of people in the road.

The melee began immediately.

There were shouts of "sit down!" and "freeze!" and a shrill whistle pierced the air, but these sounds were immediately drowned out by the wails and roars of people doubling over and falling to the ground.

Rei was swept up by the flood of people that came pouring through the street, and he began to run, too. Immediately, he was surrounded on all sides by the chaos of the fleeing throng. After about a block, he looked back and was horrified at how closely they were pursued by the riot police in their navy blue battle uniforms. A police baton cracked down loudly on the helmet of a man running next to Rei, felling him.

Rei's animal instincts took over.

They were prey, being pursued by carnivorous beasts.

He didn't know how long he ran, or how far, when he ducked into a dark alleyway flanked by smaller buildings.

He looked around, trying to catch his heaving breath. He seemed to have escaped. The moment he realized it, all of the strength went out of him, and he slumped over, his back pressed against a rough concrete wall. A feeling of relief washed over his entire body like warm water. He wanted to let it all go, to sit down right there, but, of course, he couldn't. Tonight, the city would be crawling

with not just riot police, but regular men in blue as well as plainclothes cops. He had escaped the immediate danger, but that didn't mean he was safe. Rei thrust his hands into his pockets and emptied them of their contents. For good measure, he kicked the chunks of concrete lying on the street down into the gutter.

If he was taken in for questioning and found carrying that sort of thing, he would have been dead meat. Rei was appalled by his own foolishness.

He removed his helmet, stuffed his towel and combat gloves inside, and thrust it into a gap between two buildings. In the back pocket of his jeans, he found a folded leaflet he had been given at the gathering. This, too, he shredded and discarded. Now there was no physical proof that Rei had been part of the protests.

W*hat're you doing here? Hey—what do you think this is? Thought you'd get a look at the action? You're a high school kid, aren't you? Don't they teach you to stay out of trouble at those schools? Parasitic runt, long hair like a girl ... Move it! Go home!*

Masochistically, Rei imagined the police interrogation as he made his way out of the alleyway. It was as if the feelings of heroic resolve and elation he had experienced just moments earlier had never existed. The word coward didn't come to mind, but Rei felt a sense of wretched uselessness.

The buildings surrounding him were offices and warehouses, and the block seemed bereft of human traffic in the night. Rei walked through the empty back roads in the diffuse light of the street lamps, taking one side road after the next.

He wished absently that he could just go on walking alone like this.

It wasn't that he had bought into the propaganda about taking over the capital or occupying the government buildings, but, as a nonpartisan activist, Rei had taken for granted that it was his duty to participate in the street protests that day. He had even harbored a notion of self-realization, and he had liked the idea that he wouldn't balk at being arrested. Until a few moments ago, he had believed these ideas and they had governed his behavior. But now, the only thing that remained was the memory of his pathetic flight and the ensuing feeling of humiliation.

A concrete wall loomed ahead. At first, it appeared to be a dead end, but then he saw that it was a warehouse with two sloping, narrow roads running along its sides in either direction. Rei stood at the T-junction and looked to the left and to the right.

The road to the left seemed to lead out to a main avenue. There was a sharp turn just ahead in the gently sloped street. Now and then the lights of a passing car shone in from beyond the bend. If Rei took this road, it seemed he would finally emerge back onto a major thoroughfare.

The road to the right had a faintly pungent smell, and it veered steeply into the darkness.

After a moment's hesitation, Rei turned right and began to walk.

That was when he saw it.

The first thing that met his eyes was the spray of crimson that stained the walls.

An empty void gaped where a building had been demolished. The stain glistened at him from the walls of the surrounding buildings, a curling arc of red, like an avant-garde painting, shining wetly in the glare of the mercury lamps. What could have created such a mark? Parts of it towered as high as the neighboring buildings.

In front of the hideous stain, a young girl stood.

Or was she a young girl? Her navy blue uniform was unmistakably that of a high school girl, and her slight build indicated that she was under twenty. But her face was markedly different from the faces of other girls of that age, and the black hair that shrouded her sunken cheeks made her skin look eerily pale.

Above all, Rei was pulled in and held captive by the girl's eyes.

Blue flames glittering in the void ... that described them. Her eye sockets were large, and her eyes gleamed like a nocturnal carnivore's, piercing him with an acutely homicidal glare.

Slowly, she turned back around, and the long, thin object in her hand gleamed dully in the light.

It was a Japanese sword.

When he saw the blood streaming off of its blade, Rei was overcome by the sense that he was about to be murdered by this girl. The thought quickly became a conviction.

Why did he have to die? Like the vision of the girl posed before him with the sword, his imminent death seemed all too surreal. He felt his mind numbing, and he watched vacantly as the girl deftly closed in on him.

He heard a deep voice call out behind him.

The girl froze for a moment. Then, he heard the faint sound of her shifting her grip on the sword.

He heard the shout again, low but sharp.

“Saya!” it said clearly.

The girl didn’t move an inch, but the bloodthirsty gleam left her eyes. She turned on her heels and withdrew, again moving with a fleetness that made her appear weightless.

Rei turned, his paralyzed body creaking. Behind him, a black sedan had appeared and two foreigners were walking in his direction.

Both men were dressed in black suits. One was middle-aged, with a muscular build. The other was tall and appeared older.

The middle-aged one ignored Rei and advanced toward the girl. He was carrying a large sack made of what looked like black rubber.

“What are you doing here?” The older man questioned Rei in chillingly fluent Japanese. His voice was gentle, but it had the imposing edge of someone who is accustomed to giving peremptory commands.

As if searching for an answer, Rei turned his gaze hopelessly back toward the girl.

Under the blue-white light of the mercury lamps, the girl was holding the sword directly in front of her face, rotating its blade as she examined it intently.

Realizing that she was searching for nicks, Rei shivered.

There was no emotion whatsoever in the girl’s face. Her serene manner was that of a worker tending her tools after finishing a job, and it gave Rei the chills.

The middle-aged man stooped down on one knee at a spot near the girl and loaded something into the black bag.

When Rei saw what it was, a feeling of terror gripped his entire body.

What am I doing here? WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU PEOPLE DOING HERE?! Rei tried to scream, moved by a rage he didn't fully understand.

But the shout merely echoed in his head. A heavy blow struck the back of his neck, and he crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

The lingering memory of the seconds just before he lost consciousness was that of the bloody stench of an animal.

— ENGAGEMENT —

ONE

When Rei came to, he was surprised to find himself in an ambulance.

According to the detective in charge of investigating Rei's case, a passerby had discovered Rei, collapsed and covered in blood, and had called the police.

The emergency room doctor had examined Rei and discovered that, despite his blood-soaked clothes, he was completely uninjured. That was when the detective was summoned.

If it wasn't Rei's blood, there was a possibility that he had been involved in a murder or assault of some sort. Considering the events of that night, Rei was probably not the only person to be found on the ground and covered in blood, but his circumstances were suspicious: he had been found unconscious in a place removed from the confusion.

Rei was detained for questioning, but he didn't talk. It was a cardinal rule among activists to remain silent if arrested; beyond that, however, the surrealism of what he had seen that night prevented him from speaking.

The high school girl with a blood-drenched sword.

The pair of foreigners who seemed to be her companions.

Above all, the corpse he had seen just before being struck ...

The police were the epitome of realism; all of this was beyond the scope of their comprehension.

Rei knew the phone number of the Support Center by heart. This, too, was a given for any activist, who, in order to protect the organization from police raids and the like, were bound by duty to refuse to talk and to contact their group through a lawyer. But Rei didn't ask to meet with a lawyer, and he didn't join in the conversation of the other students in his cell.

It was easier to retreat into his shell and forgo all interaction—even with those who were supposedly on his side—than to talk about what he had seen. To talk about it would be to recognize that it had been real.

Normally, when a person was detained at a police station, they had been arrested on suspicion of having committed a crime, and they were questioned and transferred to the district attorney's office within forty-eight hours. If the public prosecutor feared that the suspect was likely to flee or destroy evidence, he could solicit a detainment order and the suspect would be taken into custody.

The public prosecutor had to request the detainment order within twenty-four hours of receiving custody of the suspect, seventy-two hours after the arrest. However, when there had been mass arrests because of protests or riots, the public prosecutor could choose to drop or suspend charges. Often, the suspects were released. This was the meaning of the argot term "a three-nighter."

When a detainment order was requested, the public prosecutor had the authority to hold a suspect for ten

days. If it was determined that there was a compelling reason, this could be extended for up to ten more days, and, for crimes such as insurrection, an additional five days could be tacked on.

During this time frame, if the indictment succeeded, the prisoner was transferred to detainment under the court's authority. This could last up to two months, and could be extended by another month if deemed necessary. In the case of a major crime, or if the suspect had no fixed dwelling, the extension could be continually renewed in one-month increments.

Of course, these were the official, legal rules, but in reality suspects were sometimes detained almost indefinitely. Often, this took place not at detention centers, which were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, but in police custody.

A nonpartisan punk with no police record like Rei would normally have been released after a three-nighter; after all, he hadn't even been arrested. Still, he was suspicious, covered in blood, and he refused to say a word. They weren't about to let him go too easily.

Rei was prepared to be detained for a long time, and, in fact, he harbored no regrets or fear at the prospect.

If nothing else, Rei had definitely crossed one threshold: no matter how he felt about it, he had no control over his detention. In a way, Rei felt that this might put an end to his previous half-assed, uncertain, and consequently unpleasant mode of existence. Part of him welcomed the change.

The trouble was that this had been brought about in a completely unexpected manner, and he was sick with

the terrible fear that the things he had glimpsed would change his life in an entirely different way ... that perhaps he had witnessed something that should never have been seen.

Rei was still agonizing over this fear when he was released three days later.

He was released because the forensic tests had determined that the blood in his clothes was not that of a human being.

Perhaps it had been only a dream.

Disabused of the faint hope that he had hallucinated the whole impossible scene, Rei left the police station and returned to his life with a gait very unlike someone who had been liberated.

"I don't know if that was dog's blood or what, but I want to know what the hell were you doing there that night."

The words the public prosecutor had muttered into his ear elicited a strange feeling of *déjà vu*, and they echoed persistently in his mind.

Rei was suspended from school for three weeks. His mother freaked out when she heard the news of his suspension, and had stormed his high school. Her son had not been arrested, nor had he been indicted. He had gone into the city out of concern for his friends who were participating in the protest, where he had been brutally beaten and bloodied—he was a *victim*. She assailed his homeroom teacher with her half-fictional story, lambasted the vice principal with it, and finally made her way to the principal. There, she met her match—on the day of the protests, the students had been instructed to go directly home

after school. Nonetheless, her son had violated this admonition and gone downtown, where riots were expected. He was being suspended not for being detained by the police, but for ignoring school instructions. This explanation was repeated each time Rei's disconsolate mother made her case.

She continued to rant, unyielding, for several hours, but eventually she realized that it was a lost cause. She then went home and burst into Rei's room, crying and wailing.

Her tirade spanned an impressive range of fine points, and was peppered with her own grudges, self-abuse, lamentations, and personal sentiments; quite honestly Rei did not understand a great deal of it. However, the gist of it was something like this:

She found the high school's approach bureaucratic, completely insincere, and deplorable.

In particular, his homeroom teacher, what's-his-name, was a complete worm who had forsaken Rei in order to protect his own interests.

Nonetheless, Rei must be strong and endure his punishment, no matter how unbearable it was. He must return to school and at least get his high school diploma.

It was time for him to sever ties with his dangerous friends.

When the time came, he would go out into the world and make a name for himself, and triumph over his stupid teachers.

She hadn't given birth to Rei after a difficult labor and slaved diligently to compensate for her profligate husband only to have her son grow up to be a revolutionary.

If the riot police had beaten her son to death, she would have become the lifelong kitchen maid of the National Federation of Students Self-Government Associations.

She was an unhappy mother.

“Whatever you say. I’m tired. Please leave me alone,” Rei told her, chasing her out of his room. He burrowed into his bed.

His father, for his part, got into his own blowup with Rei’s mother, shouting, “The boy’s trash because you spoil him! Let him quit high school, spare us the tuition money! He can start earning his keep tomorrow!”

The frighteningly archaic term disinheritance was even bandied about.

The dispute over how to deal with Rei continued for two days, but his mother’s word won out in the end: the headstrong boy might do something rash in his desperation and the thing to do now was to give him time.

These regular family conflicts related to political activity were known as domestic disturbances by Rei and the other high school activists. Usually they degenerated into hopeless quagmires, and constituted the number-one cause of early retirement among teenaged revolutionaries.

Regardless of their strong words, they were still high schoolers, living under their parents’ roofs. Fundamentally, they had nowhere to go besides home and school.

At school, they were essentially an insignificant minority. They were labeled misbehaving problem kids or malicious demagogues, and they struggled almost completely alone against the overt harassment and various forms of insidious browbeating they were subjected to in the name of educational guidance. Their homes, on the other hand, were the battlefields upon which true wars of attrition unfolded through the raw, household warfare of blood relatives. Scenes of

tragedy and devastation were enacted on a daily basis, fought with such tactics as threats, pleading, and tears, and built on the fundamentalist ideology that is a parent's concern that their child is headed in the wrong direction.

School and home. In both places, they did what they had to do and defended the front lines. Their only refuge was the streets.

When they left their homes and schools and banded together in the streets, they were no longer powerless individuals. They knew that they were somebody. They were members of a force that society couldn't ignore.

On the way home from the general meeting of the protesters, Rei felt a sense of fellowship, but also a strange feeling of alienation when he saw the beaming faces of the college students streaming by him. Whether partisan or nonpartisan, the majority of the university student activists lived in boardinghouses and did not understand why the high school students were so eager to take part in the street protests. Rei did not feel he could completely relate to them either.

Their battle ended today, but our battle is only just beginning. This line had been voiced by one of Rei's companions, and it accurately embodied the sentiment that had been nagging at Rei as well.

Where have you been, what have you been doing, and with whom? When faced with these questions, whether they chose to come clean or make up a story, the high schoolers were in for a nerve-wrenching family battle. And, ultimately, there was still the issue of having nowhere else to go.

University activists talk real big about “manufacturing center disturbances” and the like, but they don’t have to deal with the domestic disturbances, and that’s why they don’t have a clue what our struggle is about. Once, one of the leaders of the high school branch of the something-or-other political faction had spoken these words in Rei’s presence. The high school activists all shared this undeniable sentiment, and, in that sense, a nonpartisan activist like Rei identified much more with the partisan high schoolers than with the nonpartisan university students.

It wasn’t about Molotov cocktails and barricades. In a sense, their main battle was the brutal struggle that loomed ahead, and it was an ethical stand, not a political one, that kept them where they were.

In a place far away from struggles of any kind, Rei wallowed in indolence.

He had always liked to sleep, and normally slept at least ten hours a night. Now, his parents were handling him with kid gloves, and Rei profited from this by never leaving his bed except to eat or relieve himself. He was like a patient in an isolation ward.

Just once, a younger student from Rei’s group came to visit and got past Rei’s parents—they had never met him before—with a communiqué: the group was formulating a plan to protest Rei’s suspension. Rei sent the kid away after making it clear that he couldn’t write a letter or make a phone call, let alone leave the house, without his parents’ close scrutiny.

He didn’t want to think about anything related to the night of the protests.

After a week, however, even Rei had had enough of being holed up in his room. He went out, telling his mother he was going to the library.

Rei's mother looked as suspicious as a cat as she watched him slip out the door. Then, like a stubborn mule, she didn't take her eyes off him until he disappeared around a corner.

At the library, he borrowed ten-days' worth of newspapers, and immersed himself in reading.

He pored carefully over several other newspapers, but none of them described anything resembling what Rei had seen that night.

He returned the newspaper file and went out into the lobby.

It was a weekday, and the library was practically empty.

He joined the loitering old people on a couch, and was struck by the feeling that the world's events seemed to belong to a distant realm, unrelated to him..

Of course, Rei knew better than anyone that this was wishful thinking. The blood on his jacket proved that what he had seen had been real, and if he believed what the detective had said—that it wasn't human blood—that meant that the last thing Rei had seen, the body, had been real, too.

Why had the men left him there?

According to the detective, a passerby had come across Rei unconscious in the street and had reported him. If Rei had been lying in that same spot, his clothes soaked with blood, there must still have been blood on the wall, and probably big puddles of it on the ground as well. The implications of that gruesome spectacle should have been obvious to anyone, and it made sense that he would have been questioned about those points. So why hadn't the detective asked him about the bloody walls?

Someone must have moved Rei out of the empty lot after he had been knocked unconscious.

It had to have been those two men.

Perhaps they had even been the ones who had called the police.

But why?

The older of the two men had stopped the girl twice when she turned her blade toward Rei. The middle-aged man had not even looked at him, completely occupied with the task of stuffing the corpse into the black bag.

If they had wanted to prevent Rei from telling people what he had seen, there was no reason for them to stop the girl. Under her piercing stare, Rei couldn't even have screamed, let alone resisted, and he had no doubt that he would have been sliced to pieces. And if they had wanted to frame him, they would have left him at the scene when they called the police. Besides, removing the corpse really didn't leave the cops anything to investigate.

Above all, in terms of selecting a patsy, Rei didn't imagine that he was really the most suitable person to plant the smoking gun on.

No matter how much he thought about that night, what happened was completely beyond his comprehension.

Not just the fact that they had left him there.

The fact that not a single sentence in any newspaper mentioned the event meant that they had somehow succeeded in covering up the whole blood-drenched mess. But how on earth had they done it?

Beyond that, who the hell were they?

And the girl with those terrifying eyes ...

If there was one thing he understood, it was their motive for wanting to dispose of that body.

Nobody would want to leave a body like that lying around.

The library was closing. Rei was startled at how much time had passed. A wave of hunger came over him as he left his seat.

If he headed home, he would arrive right at dinner time, but he was unable to resist the temptation of eating out for a change, and he headed over to his favorite noodle shop.

He ordered a large bowl of *tanmen* noodles and a bowl of rice.

The *tanmen* arrived immediately. Rei seasoned the stir-fried vegetables with chili oil and soy sauce and devoured them with his rice, then wolfed down the big bowl of noodles in nothing flat.

Savoring the satisfaction welling up through his body, Rei paid the tab and left. The street was already bathed in twilight.

This was his favorite time of day.

Nothing had come to light, nor had anything been resolved. But in any case, the day was done. All he had to do was eat his dinner and go to bed, and this thought made Rei feel as though his bizarre predicament was somebody else's problem.

Of course, the predicament itself existed independently of his personal wishes, and wasn't swayed in the least by his gastronomic state.

Though his spirits had been temporarily lifted by his excursion and the tasty meal, Rei would be brutally reminded of his predicament when he arrived at his house.

TWO

Oh, you're home." When Rei opened the door to his room, he was startled to find a man sitting on his bed.

The man was not particularly tall, nor was he very well built. His misshapen gray suit and shabby coat were typical of a detective's garb. There was a touch of greediness in the brazen way he was staring at Rei, and, overall, the middle-aged man reminded Rei of a stray mutt.

"Who are you?" Rei's voice grew high-pitched. "How did you get in here?"

Rei's parents owned a small, four-story building. The first floor housed the beauty parlor his mother ran. His parents' apartment took up the second floor, and the third and fourth floors were mostly rented out as office space. Rei had his own room up on the fourth floor.

Because of the offices, various people came in and out of the building, and Rei's family always kept their doors locked.

Rei was sure he had locked his door when he had gone out that day.

"You must be Rei Miwa, third-year student at Tokyo K High School?" By way of introduction, the man pulled a black badge out of his inner coat pocket.

Rei had seen this a million times on TV and in the movies, but never before in real life. When he realized the man before him was an actual police detective, Rei's blood pressure shot up and his body stiffened.

Should he run away? He contemplated the idea for a moment, but reconsidered. At this point, there were no grounds for him to be arrested, nor for his home to be searched. He decided to play it cool.

"I suppose you have a warrant?"

Usually, the police obtained warrants through the public prosecutor, who applied for them at the courthouse; without such documents it was illegal for them to detain a suspect or enter his domicile.

"I have no such thing."

"Then get out. You're breaking and entering. If you don't get out ..." Rei got that far, but then found himself at a loss for words.

"Yes? If I don't get out?" The man answered with an oddly affable smile. "You'll call the police? But I'm already here! Or are you going to call your parents?"

I'll throw you out! Rei wanted to say. But although the man was scrawny, he was still a detective, and Rei himself wasn't particularly confident in his own strength. Not to mention the fact that he had never struck another person in his life. This was clearly an illegal act, and Rei would have been justified in reporting it to the police. But, while he was a punk, he did have his reputation as an antiestablishment activist to consider. And the despicable act of running to his parents was out of the question.

"You don't want your folks to know there's a detective here to see you, do you? I was being thoughtful by waiting for you in here."

Rei was at a loss. As if to throw him a lifeline, the detective added, "Don't worry, I don't have the slightest interest in your ideology or what you do outside. I want to talk about something else."

"I have nothing to discuss with you."

"Yes, you do. For example," the man narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice, "what exactly it was that you saw ten nights ago."

He saw the flustered look on Rei's face and laughed like a hyena.

"Come on in, anyway. It's your room, after all."

Utter defeat.

Rei entered the room, still glaring at the man, and closed the door behind him.

"This is a nice room," the man said sarcastically, surveying the small bedroom.

The room was the product of a compromise between a rebellious son who would have lived in a closet if it meant leaving home and acquiring independence, and parental units determined not to let that happen.

The small room was almost completely buried by the bed, desk, and large bookshelf, but there was a small sink installed in the corner, and the room had both gas lines and plumbing. There was a restroom in the landing on each floor, so Rei could go about his business without dealing with his parents except at mealtimes and when he wanted to bathe.

The front entrance of the building was locked in the evenings after the office workers had gone home, but naturally Rei had made a secret copy of the key and could come and go at night as he pleased. On several occasions, he had

gone to the trouble of sneaking out in the middle of the night, going to school, and leaving leaflets on the desks in every classroom. Then he would return home and innocently eat breakfast with his parents before going back to school.

"A boardinghouse life in your very own home. Don't know what you're so dissatisfied with."

For an uninvited guest, the man had an astonishingly presumptuous manner.

"Nobody asked you," Rei shot back. He sat down cross-legged in his chair, as if to remind the man whose room this was. "Listen, man ..."

"Man? I'm older than you. Let's have a little respect."

"You still haven't told me who you are," Rei answered unapologetically. He had made up his mind to fight back. "Isn't it customary to introduce yourself before you start admonishing other people?"

"Oh, did I forget?" Mockingly, the man scratched his head and frowned into space as if racking his brain, ignoring Rei's glare. "Let's see. My name is ... Hajime Gotouda."

The man might as well have said, *My fake name is ...*

"All right then. Gotouda it is," Rei answered unsmilingly. "Fine by me."

In general, in regards to the manner in which humans address other humans, including the use of disparaging and intimidating language, there are a number of basic principles that come into play in order to secure a psychological advantage, control the exchange, and win out over an opponent.

For example, if the other person takes an aggressive tack, the customary countertactic is to respond in a manner even

more aggressive. However, if one's personality or the volume of one's voice is unsuited to this approach, it may be easier to take on an exaggeratedly cool tone and goad an opponent's deliberate belligerence into an emotional outburst. When an opponent blows up, he loses his advantage, and, if he becomes violent, he has effectively guaranteed his own defeat.

Conversely, if an opponent attempts to persuade with logic, one can better control the situation and develop it into an advantage by coming up with complex arguments rather than short ones. However, this approach requires tremendous mental effort, and in fact a better tactic is to let an opponent develop his argument, then poke holes in it, and take advantage of his subsequent psychological discomfiture to turn the tables.

In either case, the most important thing to ensuring victory is the pragmatic understanding that it is not the content of the argument itself that matters, but the effectiveness of one's attitude toward the other person.

The idea that there is a universally superior or inferior side to any issue, or that people can come to an understanding through dialogue, are democratic fallacies that do nothing but psychological damage and do not apply to real interpersonal relationships. What is needed, sadly, is none other than the extremist self-serving tactics espoused by partisan ideology, as well as the ethics of zealotry.

Of course, these principles are only effective in the case of exclusively verbal exchanges. They do not apply in a street encounter with gangsters or thugs, when being interrogated by the police in a sweatbox, or in other circumstances in which there is a possibility of the conversation devolving into violence.

Rei was useless in a physical fight, but he felt strangely comfortable with his ability to manage in this kind of verbal power struggle. A sort of fortitude some might call insolence came over him when he was confronted by an adult—perhaps he had been toughened by the harassment that passed for student discipline at his school.

Rei's bold composure in the face of his teachers' open derision was legendary among his peers. The teachers saw him differently: a student who unrepentantly distributed pamphlets denouncing the school, who responded to their censure with brazen impudence and blithe falsehoods. In other words, every educator's worst nightmare.

In his experience as a problem student, Rei had learned to be wary of types like this man who called himself Gotouda.

Rei opened his desk drawer and took out a white pack of Long Peace cigarettes. Deftly, he drew one out and put it in his mouth, lit it with his Zippo, and slowly exhaled a curtain of violet smoke.

Gotouda's face went blank.

As if to confirm the transformation, Rei took another deep drag.

A light buzz came over his body, and he hastily blew the smoke out toward the ceiling. His vision narrowed dramatically and he felt a tingling in his lower body. He grasped the arms of his chair to steady himself.

How did he expect to face off with the man if he went and got all lightheaded!?

As is typical of high school revolutionaries, most of Rei's compatriots smoked, but Rei himself wasn't much of a smoker. He kept a few cigarettes around his room because

he enjoyed the nicotine rush, and he chose Long Peaces because he liked their white filters.

Gotouda's eyes fixed on the carton. "Those are some expensive cigarettes."

Rei was taken aback. The man wasn't angry, he just wanted a smoke! Rei opened the candy tin he used as an ashtray and sadistically rubbed the cigarette out.

For a second, Gotouda's face resembled that of a dog whose food dish has been taken away. His jaw went slack and a sigh escaped him. It was pathetic.

Rei was about to offer him one but stopped himself when he saw Gotouda reach into his inner coat pocket and take out a mangled pack of Echos.

This was no time to be taking pity on some ragbag detective.

So? What did you want to talk about?" Rei made his tone harsh.

"Where should I start?"

"What do I care? You're the one who wants to talk."

Gotouda pondered for a moment, blowing stinky clouds of smoke from his cheap cigarette. Then, deliberately, he began to speak.

"I'm investigating a homicide case. The victim was a high school activist like yourself."

This time, Rei's face went expressionless.

"About a month ago, his body was found in a deserted building near his home. The cause of death was excessive blood loss."

"What high school—"

"I'll give you the details later. If you cooperate, that is." Gotouda headed off Rei's interruption.

What did he mean, cooperate? Rei had a bad feeling about this, but his curiosity got the better of him.

"May I go on?"

"Go ahead."

"Three days later, another kid was found dead in his second-story bedroom. Another high schooler with a record of activism. Excessive blood loss, again. And three days later—"

"Another one!?"

Gotouda ignored Rei's surprised outburst and continued. "This time, under the steel bridge at the Tamagawa River. Another high school kid, same cause of death."

"Just a minute!" Rei cut in again, unable to contain himself. "This wasn't in the news."

So *what*, said the look on Gotouda's face. "Don't tell me you suffer from the misconception that the newspapers and TV broadcasters evenhandedly publicize everything that happens?"

"Yeah, but ... A serial killing!"

"Accidental deaths and suicides happen all the time. And, in these troubled times, the media is very busy."

"You said they were homicides."

"You have a good memory."

Gotouda's cheeks puckered into a twisted smile, but he quickly pursed his lips. "There are several reasons to suspect foul play. The first is the cause of death. All of the victims had lost a large quantity of blood, and there is no mistaking that this was what killed them. However, there were no external wounds on their bodies, other than what appeared to be bite wounds on one wrist."

“Bite wounds?”

“Bite wounds,” Gotouda said in low voice, watching Rei’s reaction closely. “All three had bite marks on the inside of their left wrist. Physically, it would appear that they had bled to death from these wounds, but, realistically, it’s quite impossible. You understand why, of course.”

“I understand.”

“Even if you use a blade, it requires a lot of careful preparation to bleed to death from the wrist. A bite wound wouldn’t bleed anywhere near enough. Moreover, not a single drop of blood was found at the sites where the bodies were discovered, aside from minute amounts in the victims’ clothes.”

Gotouda lit a second cigarette and smoked it slowly, as if giving Rei time to mull this over.

“Maybe they did it somewhere else ...”

“The second victim was discovered in his home. As far as the other two cases are concerned, if the method of suicide can’t be established, it could just be assumed that the murderer also abandoned the corpse. Don’t you think it makes more sense to think of them as a series of eccentric murders, rather than to embrace the possibility that such bizarre suicides just happened to occur three in a row?”

Rei had to agree.

“Even setting aside the way they were killed,” Gotouda said, “the victims share another crucial commonality.”

“Wait a minute. Just because someone’s an activist is no reason they should become the target of indiscriminate sabotage.”

Rei sensed how this was leading toward him, and his voice automatically sharpened.

"Don't rush ahead, now," Gotouda admonished him with adult forbearance and continued. "They were political extremists, but they weren't chairmen or leaders of their groups. I don't know exactly how to say this, but, in terms of motive, it seems awfully unnatural for someone to just take down three snot-nosed teenagers."

"Snot-nosed teenagers. Right."

"Oh, don't get bent out of shape about every little thing. It's just a manner of speaking," Gotouda muttered, then continued. "Be it sabotage or intergroup feuding or what have you, from my outsider point of view, killing three high school kids is simply too ineffective. However, the fact that these three kids from different schools all belonged to the same organization—now that stinks to high heaven."

"The same organization?"

Gotouda took his notebook out of his inner coat pocket and riffled through it. "The Proletarian League SR Faction High School Committee. Heard of it?"

Of course Rei had.

It was also referred to as the National Federation of Students Self-Government Associations Faction 3-13. It was said to be extremist, but its true nature was more complex and convoluted, and it encompassed an inordinate number of political organizations and bodies. It also contained a militant wing commonly known as SR.

"It's pronounced *es err*."

"Oh ho!" Gotouda looked up from his notebook, impressed. "So it's not English, then?"

"German, I think." Or maybe it was Russian? Rei wasn't sure. He'd always hated language classes in school.

“What does it stand for?”

“Socialist Revolution. But usually when you say SR it refers to the Socio-Revolutionary Party that was established in Russia in 1902. They contained a terrorist group—they called it a militia—and they made a name for themselves by assassinating prominent figures and so forth. But under the Bolshevik single-party dictatorial regime, they were denounced as typical petit-bourgeois radicals. In 1789, the original faction declared the use of terrorist tactics and split off from the Narodniks to become the People’s Will ...”

Rei trailed off. It had just occurred to him how idiotic it was for him, a political activist, to be lecturing a detective on Russian revolutionary parties.

“What’s wrong?” Gotouda asked, looking up. He had been avidly taking notes.

“You’ve made it clear that, from the commonalities among the victims, it is highly likely that the three murders are related. But you still haven’t gotten to the point.” Instigate a discussion, get your opponent talking, and, before long, you’ve got him right where you want him. That was the trick Gotouda had played on Rei, and, when Rei realized it, he hardened his voice and sought to recover his defensive stance. “Why weren’t these incidents in the news? We’re talking about a serial killing.”

“And a twisted one, at that.”

“It should have been all over the weeklies and television, not to mention the newspapers. Why wasn’t it publicized?”

“They didn’t want it publicized.”

“Who didn’t?”

“The cops.”

"That would be you, right?"

"I am a member of the police, but as a single police officer I do not represent the entire force. And I don't appreciate that kind of high-handed generalization. I don't think you would agree to speak for the entire population of political extremists, would you?"

Rei sighed and was silent for a moment. Then he started talking again, as quickly as possible. "Listen. It's after dark. Any time now, my mother's going to call me for dinner. And if I don't go right away, she'll pound on the door until I open up. That's the kind of mother she is."

Gotouda concurred readily. "I understand. I'll get to the point." He reached into his inner pocket for a third cigarette, but didn't find one. He made a big production out of searching various pockets while he gazed obviously at Rei's Long Peaces. "Mind if I ..."

It was a pathetic display from a detective, but Rei had no time to worry about that. He tossed the package over.

Happily, Gotouda took a cigarette out and put it in his mouth, then surprised Rei by putting the rest of the pack into his pocket. If this was an act, it was performed with a naturalness that merited an Oscar.

He lit the cigarette with his cheap lighter and blew a large cloud of smoke into the air. "Where was I?"

"You were going to tell me what the hell you're doing here!" Rei knew he was playing into the man's hand by getting upset, but he couldn't help raising his voice. "What does this serial murder have to do with me?"

Still relishing the Long Peace, Gotouda peered into Rei's eyes. For some reason, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

"We started out by digging up all of the high school SR groups. There've been three deaths, so there could be a fourth. Standard investigative procedure. We've compiled a list of all the high school kids who belong to the organization, and all the schools involved. Seems there's a cell at your high school, too."

There was an SR presence at Rei's school, but nothing on the scale of an actual cell.

Gotouda consulted his notebook again. "Shouji Aoki, age seventeen. One of your compatriots, no?"

"If he was, would I tell you?"

Even if this Gotouda worked in homicide and not public safety—and even that was questionable—Rei wasn't about to leak information about his school's organizations.

"Apparently, the SR Faction is a small organization. From what I've gathered there are fifty laborers and college students, a hundred, max, if you count sympathizers, and only seven high school kids involved. There were four high schools in Tokyo that had members. But now that three have been killed, the only one left is at your school."

"And?" Rei shot back, carefully watching the detective's profile, which had begun to look blurry. "Why me? If you want information, why not go directly to them?"

"You got picked up ten days ago, didn't you?"

"I wasn't arrested." *I was just taken into custody*, he was about to add, but he stopped himself. "I was wrongfully detained. They kept me for three days even though they didn't have a case. Thanks to them—"

"You got three weeks suspension." Gotouda chuckled unpleasantly. "Arrested, wrongfully detained, whatever."

The important part is the circumstances in which you were found. According to the report I read, your clothes were soaked with blood but there were no injuries found on your body, other than a minor bump on the back of your head. No internal bleeding, no brain-wave abnormalities ... Whoever hit you knew what he was doing."

"So?" Rei sensed that the conversation was closing in on its crux and he stared deliberately at Gotouda as he responded. "Someone hit me. I was discovered covered in blood. How does that tie in with your case?"

"The issue is the blood. From what I hear, it wasn't human blood."

Rei struggled between wanting to find out what this so-called Gotouda knew and not wanting to deal with anything connected to what he had seen that night.

"What kind of blood was it?" he ventured.

"Who knows? Since it wasn't human blood, there's no case, is there? Forensics has better things to do than waste time analyzing matters not connected to an investigation. Where're the clothes?"

"What?"

"The clothes. The bloody clothes. Since no case was established, I assume they weren't confiscated as evidence."

This was true: the cops had returned the jacket to him, along with his shoes and belt and the rest when he had been released from custody. Three days had passed and the stains had darkened, but there was still no way Rei was going to walk around town wearing a jacket covered in blood. He'd carried it home under his arm ...

"When I got home, the first thing I did was take a bath.

When I was done, all the clothes were gone, down to my socks and my underwear. My mother must have washed them. Either that or she was disgusted and threw them out.”

Gotouda tore at his slicked-back hair and growled like a dog. Then he raised his head and spat, “Moron! That was valuable evidence, you dunce!”

“Who’re you to call me a dunce?” Rei shouted back despite himself. “Isn’t it a little strange that there wasn’t a drop of blood at your crime scenes? The place I saw was—” *swimming in blood*. He stopped himself before he said it, but it was too late.

Gotouda had him. With a satisfied smile, he patted Rei on the shoulder.

“You did see something.” He looked pleased.

Just like some cheesy detective show, Rei thought, slumping his shoulders dejectedly.

As if timing his shots, Gotouda quickly slipped him a photograph. When Rei looked at it, a shock went through him that almost started his blood flowing backwards.

“You saw this, didn’t you?”

It looked like those serial photos you get in a photo booth for a license. It was grainy and blurred, but there was no mistaking the girl’s face. The school uniform, which was visible from the chest up, was different from the one Rei remembered. But there was the ephemeral, ghost-white skin, and the contrastingly intense eyes ...

“Where did you get this picture?”

“While I was investigating the three murders, I discovered something interesting. In each case, a transfer student joined the victim’s class a few days before the incident. The

day after the incident, the new student transferred back out. When I got the transfer files from the schools—”

“They were all the same person.”

“Three school transfers, within a period of around ten days. And, without fail, someone in the class she joins kicks the bucket. No question, we’ve got ourselves a first-class—”

“Suspect?”

“Primary witness, for now.” He tucked the photograph into his notebook and put it back in his pocket. He continued, assuming a painfully sincere expression. “Saya Otonashi, age seventeen. Other than her name and age, the rest is inconsistent garbage.”

Saya. That was the name the tall foreigner had called her that night.

But her name and her age ... no, perhaps her entire existence was false. The doubt sprung up in Rei’s mind for no particular reason.

“So, where did she disappear to?”

“Disappear?” Gotouda raised his eyebrows. “I never said she disappeared.”

“Then where is she?”

“She transferred to a new school three days ago. Yours.”

Rei was struck speechless. Gotouda pushed his advantage.

“Third year, homeroom D. Shouji Aoki’s class, if I’m not mistaken?”

For an immeasurable moment, Rei remained dumb-struck, unable to grasp the situation. Then he smelled the rancid breath of the doglike middle-aged man in front of him and remembered where he was.

“Hey, are you listening?”

Rei stared blankly at the man's face. He cursed his fate, realizing that he wasn't going to be able to put the incident behind him.

He could play dumb and pretend he had forgotten what had happened, but the situation refused to pass him by undisturbed. During the past week, while Rei had been gorging himself with food and wallowing in sleep, it had in fact closed in on him at an alarming speed.

He was flooded with anger and self-loathing at his own unawareness, taking comfort in a stupid bowl of noodles.

"Tell me everything." *You'll feel better.* Another line straight out of a detective show, but it worked. Rei talked.

In a power struggle, another fundamental rule is that the party who manages to control the most information always has the advantage. Rei was too young to be a match for a detective, who had years of professional experience navigating such waters.

A high school girl with a bloody sword and a pair of shady foreigners?"

Gotouda jotted furiously in his notebook. Rei didn't know if Gotouda believed him or not, but, in any case, he recounted everything he had seen that night.

Except for one thing ...

"This stinks. This stinks so much, it's spraining my nose." Gotouda literally wrinkled his nose as he shut his notebook. "Blood-drained corpses ... wrist bites ... bloodless scenes and blood-drenched scenes ... murdered high school kids and a serially transferring high school girl ... abandoned corpses and collected corpses ..."

"How do they all fit together?" Rei cut in, impatient with Gotouda's absent muttering and head rubbing.

"Who knows? That's what we've got to figure out next."

"We?"

"Me and you." Gotouda's manner was oddly crisp.

"Just a minute!" Rei burst out, stunned by this sudden twist. "Why me? I'm just a witness. Why should I have to deal with such a warped—"

"A witness? Oh, you're in this deep! I have no idea why they didn't take you down on the spot, but you've seen the faces of that crazy sword-fighting girl, and the unsavory foreigners, too. On top of that, the next target is one of your so-called comrades."

"He's being targeted, then?"

"Three out of seven have already been killed. Of the remaining four, three have disappeared over the last several months. They haven't been seen at school or at home. The only one we've been able to locate is your buddy Shouji Aoki, and the sketchy girl in question has transferred into his class and has been following him around. The plot has thickened."

"They why don't you arrest her?"

"On what grounds?"

"What do you mean, what grounds? If nothing else, I'm a witness."

"Did you see a body that night?"

Of course he had. If he hadn't, there might still be a way out. But he had definitely seen it.

If he spilled that information, however, this would no longer just be a question of a girl with a Japanese sword and a twisted murder case. The truth was, he doubted that

even Gotouda, the detective in charge of the case, would have believed him.

"It was dark. I couldn't really see clearly ..." he mumbled.

"Let's see. No body. Can't really remember what the crime scene looked like. The witness is a teenaged political extremist, currently suspended from high school. Under the circumstances, I don't think the judge is going to be in a big hurry to cough up an arrest warrant."

"It's true I don't remember the scene very well, but it was a gruesome sight. There was blood everywhere, even sprayed up on the walls ..."

"Yeah, but we don't know if it was human blood, do we? In this day and age, it could have been some psycho who killed a pig or a chicken and sprayed the blood all over the place. For that level of thing, even if there's a report, it's considered mischief. Case closed. Can you be sure that it wasn't a stray dog or something like that that girl killed?"

It hadn't been a dog.

Rei was sure, but of course he couldn't say so.

"The stuff I told you ..."

"I believe you," Gotouda said promptly. "Not that I have any reason to, but I know you're not lying, at least. Still, I've already explained to you why I can't arrest her."

"So call her into the station for voluntary questioning as a primary witness, and then take her into custody and put the screws on her nice and slow. They pulled that on me, and detained me without grounds for three days!" Rei persisted, now completely betraying the ideals of a political activist.

"I can't."

"Why can't you?"

"I've been taken off the case," Gotouda muttered. His expression was doleful. "Not just me. The entire investigation has been transferred out of criminal investigations and into public safety. The team was disbanded before we even set up shop."

"But why—"

"Someone intervened. Bam! Someone who had the power to completely silence the newspapers and television stations, too."

"The Police Commissioner?"

"We're a public police force. If that sort of thing was done openly, there'd be a scandal. I think it came from higher up."

"Higher up? Who the hell would that be?" Rei exploded.

"How the hell should I know?" Gotouda shouted back, infected by Rei's agitation. "I'm a lowly police sergeant, three ranks up from a beat-pounder! I'm eight ranks beneath the commissioner. How should I know what goes on up above the clouds?"

"Would you keep it down? What if my mother hears you?"

"I guess she'll just have to call your dad, then!"

Gotouda took out a third Long Peace and attempted to regain his composure.

Rei pricked his ears and listened for a sound from downstairs. But it seemed his mother was still at work, and there was no reaction to their outburst.

"Sounds like we're okay."

"Yeah. Anyway, why are you here then, if you've been taken off the case?"

The nicotine seemed to have calmed Gotouda down. He showed his characteristic warped-hyena grin. "Just stubborn, I guess. I couldn't let go of a shady case like this and still be able to sleep at night. Also, well, this is just

a sense I get, but ... I don't think public safety is having much success with this case, either."

"It's bigger than a political issue, then."

"Yeah. This case is a real humdinger. Make no mistake."

"And you want me to get involved with it?"

"I told you—you're already in it up to your neck. If you sit back and watch your comrade get snuffed, it'll be a blot on your name as an activist. Besides, there's no telling when they might come for you." He gave Rei a measured look, then went on. "The police won't protect you. And, if you have any pride, you won't go crying to them. Face the facts. Next time, you may not get off with just a bump on the head."

Rei grabbed the cigarette out of Gotouda's hand and took a deep drag. "There's one problem."

"What?"

"You know my name, you know my school. From the fact that you're here, you obviously know my address, too." Rei tried to keep his manner cool. "I don't know anything, other than the fact that you're a detective."

"I told you, the name's Gotouda!" Gotouda sighed and took out his badge and presented it to Rei. There was a stamp that read Tokyo Police Department of Criminal Investigations, First Investigation Division. Below it, in an alarmingly awkward scrawl, was the name Hajime Gotouda.

"There's one more problem."

"More?"

"How did you get into this room?"

"Oh, that!" Gotouda seemed amused. "Ask and you shall receive, knock and the door shall be opened ... I just knocked and came in."

— MANEUVER —

ONE

The headquarters of the Tokyo K High School Social Science Club—also known as Social Sci—were located on the second floor of the clubroom building, facing the playing field.

There was a path that started at the front gate and ran past the clubroom building and around the playing field to the school building. A row of ginkgo trees grew along it—a relic of the school's pre-war identity as a prefectural junior high school—and at times they could look quite breathtaking. Unfortunately, the clubroom building itself was a grim steel-and-concrete creation that was only a few years old.

It had originally been built for the athletic teams that used the playing field—the baseball team, track and field club, soccer team, and so forth. It was strange that a humanities group like Social Sci would be housed in the clubhouse, and in fact nobody knew why it was they were allowed to use the room. One plausible theory was that the school administration saw Social Sci as a likely haven for left-leaning students—paramount to the school newspaper and literary clubs—and therefore sought to isolate it by stationing it out among the jocks. There was also

a countertheory that the location of the clubroom was a glorious coup by former Social Sci leaders who had somehow managed to score the most private spot on campus. In any case, nobody knew how much validity there was to either story.

In the clubroom, Rei and five other boys sat around a large wooden desk, the only furniture in the room.

They were all members of the Tokyo K High School Democratization Protest Committee. In fact, the six of them were the sole members of the Protest Committee, and they also comprised the full membership of the Social Sci club.

When Rei joined forces with Gotouda, the first thing he had been asked to do was to obtain the cooperation of this group. The actual investigation would of course be conducted by Gotouda, who was a professional. Since it was difficult for a member of the police force to gather information on school grounds, this would have been Rei's job, but while he was on suspension it was impossible for him to snoop around on campus. Thus, the only option open to them was to enlist additional help. Rei had misgivings about involving his friends in such a dicey matter, but he also couldn't ignore the very real issue of Shouji Aoki being the next potential victim.

Last night, after Gotouda left his room, Rei had gone to a pay phone and called the club chairman, Shibano, and asked him to convene a meeting.

The early-spring sun that shone in through the window sunk quickly in the sky. One wall of the clubroom faced the playing field, and the thudding of baseballs mixed with the strange, echoing calls the players shouted out

to one another. The meeting started just after classes let out, but by the time Rei finished his long explanation, the school was getting ready to close for the evening.

“Are you in your right mind?” The first to speak was Shibano who, as the club chairman, usually facilitated the meetings. “While you were lying on your ass at home, do you know how much we scrambled to get ready to protest your suspension from school? We haven’t seen you in ages, and now you show up and tell us you’ve teamed up with the police and want us to run around the school playing detective? You think you can pull that kind of crap just because you got locked up for three days?”

Shibano was the central figure in distributing leaflets and other such information-dissemination projects. He was one of the more moderate members of the committee, advocating steady on-campus protest activities.

During his first year of high school, Shibano had taken a leave of absence to be treated for tuberculosis, which was unusual in this day and age. As a result, he was in the same grade as the rest of them but was one year older. He seemed somehow grownup compared to Rei and the others, who tended to use a lot of incendiary language but failed to take action. Not only had he managed to save money at his part-time job, buy a mimeograph machine, and somehow scrape together a system to regularly distribute agitation bills, he also had the follow-through to diligently canvas for the funds needed to cover the cost of ink and paper. As the chairman of Social Sci, he negotiated with the school authorities and student council, single-handedly dealing with cumbersome red tape. There was something

about him that elicited the respect of Rei and the other street protesters.

“Besides, what’re the objective facts of this alleged serial murder case? Have you thought about that? What’s to say that this detective Gotouda isn’t full of shit?”

“Well, if nothing else, that Saya girl has transferred to our school, right?” Nabeta backed Rei up. He was a member of the literary club as well, and, although he was a devoted advocate of street tactics, he also handled almost all of the draftsmanship of the group’s agitation bills.

“What if she did? What does that prove?” Shibano was not easily convinced.

“I hear she’s totally hot.” Amano came at the issue from a slightly different angle. He was uncharacteristically optimistic for an activist, and his naiveté sometimes made the others wince.

Next to him, Doigaki frowned and smoothed back his beloved hairdo. He spoke nervously. “Whether or not she’s hot is not the main issue right now. We’re talking about a possible murderer. That is, if you believe Miwa’s story.”

“Isn’t that what this comes down to? Whether or not we believe Miwa’s story?”

“Don’t trivialize the matter,” Shibano said, coolly dismissing Amano’s simplistic conclusion. “Listen. Even if Miwa really did see a girl with a Japanese sword—”

“She’s probably a right-winger!” the incorrigible Amano cut in again.

“If this was right-wing sabotage, they’d choose a more prominent target. Who’d be pathetic enough to go around killing three high schoolers?” Doigaki said.

“And if the girl was the murderer, the cause of death would be different. On the one hand, you’ve got a Japanese sword and a corpse with blood everywhere, on the other you’ve got three bodies sucked dry as crackers.” This was from Nabeta.

“And is that even true? Three murders in a row, and not your everyday killings, either. What about their families and neighbors? Could something like that really be kept from getting out?”

“Their parents wouldn’t want to go around broadcasting that sort of thing. If the police told them to keep quiet, it makes sense they would decide to go along with it. The guys that were killed weren’t going to school anyway. They could just classify it as extended sick leave and be done with it.”

“But drained of all of their blood? Who takes that kind of time and trouble to kill someone?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“You do hear people talk about trial by blood and blood sanctions ...”

“Yeah, but not trial by blood draining!”

“Yeah, we’re talking liver sashimi!”

“The whole thing has to be a hoax.”

“Besides, the whole bit about disobeying the higher-ups and refusing to drop an investigation ... that story’s so old, it should be set to music.”

“But he had a badge, right?”

“Don’t be stupid. In some parts of town, ten dollars will get you a whole pile of badges.”

“The investigations division thing is fishy, too.”

"Yeah, it's not like we can call up the police department and verify it."

"Like, 'hey, do you have a detective there named Gotouda?'"

"Probably made up some story and found himself a bummed-out political activist, thinking he could get some inside information."

"You think the police would go to that much trouble just to get close to us?"

"It's not like we have any inside information worth digging up."

"It'd be faster to go through the school."

"They probably have their reasons."

"It's a pretty bizarre story."

"That's why I'm saying we have no way of knowing that it's true!" Shibano exploded. His attempts to lead the discussion in a logical direction had been heedlessly thwarted, and the meeting had deteriorated into a free-for-all. "There's no point in conducting meaningless debates over uncertain information and speculations based on hearsay! Take a calm, objective look at the facts ..."

"Yeah, but as you said, there's no way for us to determine what is fact," Nabeta sounded fed up. "Not that I'm backing up Amano, but doesn't this come down to whether or not we believe Miwa?"

"Did you really see it?" Amano leaned forward and peered into Rei's face.

"You could have dreamed the whole thing after getting hit on the head. I mean, it sounds like something out of the movies. A high school girl with a Japanese sword, dripping with blood ..."

"Sounds like a Toei movie. Something Teruo Ishii would come up with." This came from Doigaki, a fan of classical Japanese gangster movies.

"I've got it!" Amano had an epiphany. "I bet it was a movie set or something!"

"You moron. Who would be filming a movie at a time and place like that?" said Doigaki.

"There's no reason for a guy to be hit in the head just for seeing a movie set," Nabeta pointed out.

"Then maybe it was some weird religious ceremony, or a rock band rehearsal ..."

"Like I said ... why on earth would anyone be doing something like that in the middle of the chaos of the unified antiwar protests?" Shibano shouted down Amano's unrelenting suggestions.

"I saw it," Rei mumbled, breaking his silence. Un-wittingly, they all turned and looked at him.

Over and over again, Rei had asked himself if he had really seen it. He'd prayed, secretly, that he hadn't. But, once he'd spoken the words aloud, a transformation had occurred within him, and his doubt metamorphosed into something resembling certainty.

Why had he been so terrified to admit it?

To question what you have seen is to question the reality in which you live. Reality can't be denied—if you want to live in it, you have to own up to what you have seen.

Even if it contradicts reality.

Not without regret, Rei repeated himself. "I definitely saw it."

A strange silence ran through the room, and along with the echoes of the noise from the playing field, Rei's sense of the real world faded off into the distance.

If he was going to tell them about the body, this was the time.

Here, now, he could do it. Rei made up his mind and opened his mouth to speak, but then felt an icy stare aimed at him. He raised his head.

"Then why didn't you tell us sooner?" Shibano's bark brought Rei back to reality.

In that instant, Rei's desire to tell them evaporated, accompanied by a deep, whole-body chill.

"You hole up for your room in a week, and now you come around with this outrageous story ... what the hell is going on with you?" Shibano continued to shout at Rei.

Murano stepped in and attempted to pacify the fuming Shibano. "Come on, don't get so angry. Anyone who saw something like that would be confused. Besides, he was nearly killed, right?"

"That's *why* he should have told us!"

"How about this?" Nabeta addressed the group. "There's the girl with the sword that Miwa saw, the photo that Gotouda guy showed him, and the girl called Saya Otonashi that transferred into Aoki's class. First of all, we find out if they're really all the same person."

"And if they are?" Shibano asked, still unsatisfied.

"If nothing else, it'll be a step forward from where we are now. Just as you said, there's no point in arguing about circumstances that are entirely unverifiable. And, whether it's true or not, if Rei says Aoki's life is in danger,

we can't just ignore that. After that, we'll take it from there. A maneuver. Can we at least agree on that?"

"No objections" Doigaki answered, and Amano raised a hand in assent.

"Aoki, what about you?" Shibano asked.

For some reason, Aoki hadn't yet said a word. He sat still as a stone, smoking cigarettes in complete silence.

"What a crock of shit," he spat. He ground out his cigarette against the wall and tossed it out the window.

"A *maneuver*? You've got to be kidding me!" His voice was low but his manner of speaking was so poisonous that for a moment, nobody spoke. With a scornful laugh, Aoki continued. "Since when do political activists lap up detective's stories? You guys are so *nice*, it's criminal. Making a huge deal out of nothing. What morons."

"But Miwa saw ..." Ayano argued.

Aoki didn't so much as glance at him. Instead, he turned his glare onto Rei. "What did you see?"

His gaze was penetrating. His narrow eyes stared straight at Rei from behind his black-rimmed glasses.

The icy glare Rei felt earlier must have been Aoki's.

This sensation of being frozen was connected somehow to the raw memory in his chest.

"Say it. What did you see?"

"I already told you."

"WHAT DID YOU SEE?"

"A girl with eyes like an animal ... a sword dripping with blood ... two foreigners ..." Rei mumbled, fighting for breath.

He couldn't tear his eyes away from Aoki's stare.

"What else ... did you see?"

Suddenly, they heard a knock, and every eye in the room turned to the sliding door.

Liberated from Aoki's gaze, Rei turned and was startled to see a middle-aged man opening the door without waiting for an invitation.

"Hi, there. Thanks." Gotouda stepped blithely into the room, casting a sideways glance at their bewildered stares. He closed the door behind him.

"Who the hell are you?" Even Shibano seemed fazed.

"Hasn't Rei told you? Allow me to introduce myself."

When they saw his proffered badge, all of the boys changed color and sprang to their feet.

"MIWA, WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?"

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?" Shibano and Rei shouted in unison.

"Well, I thought I'd wait outside just in case you had trouble convincing them. And it sounded like you were starting to fall apart."

"You were listening in?" Doigaki demanded, reaching for a two-by-four that was propped against the wall.

"The way you guys were shouting in here, I couldn't help overhearing if I'd wanted to."

Rei watched Gotouda respond in his habitual arrogant manner and wondered if the man was in his right mind.

This was different from when Gotouda had confronted Rei in his bedroom. Of course, they weren't at war, but it was outrageous for a detective to think he could waltz into a high school as if he owned the place and barge right into the headquarters of what were considered political

extremists. Even if they didn't jump him, it was obvious that if they made a fuss and word got out that he was continuing the investigation unsanctioned, he would be in a tight corner.

Foreseeing disaster, Rei had no sooner rolled his eyes heavenward than the wooden door slammed open again, and another shout rang out through the room.

"What the hell is all this noise about?"

The man wore a dark red track suit and sneakers, and his salt-and-pepper hair was worn in a neat crewcut. When Rei saw him, he felt sick.

It was Kume, the P.E. teacher. He also served as both the rugby team's advisor and the school guidance counselor. Before Kume had become a teacher, he had been an instructor in the Japanese self-defense forces, and Rei and the others resented him for being one of the most die-hard right-wingers on campus.

The protest committee's meeting had been interrupted first by a police detective, and now by a guidance counselor. It was a worst-case scenario come true.

The sharp-eyed Kume began to shout again when he spotted Rei, who was cradling his head in his hands in despair.

"Miwa! What the hell are you doing here? You're supposed to be at home under suspension!"

Then his eyes fell on Doigaki, who was still holding the two-by-four. His menacing voice rang out again. "Doigaki! I thought you were home sick today!"

"I started to feel better in the afternoon, sir, so I thought I might as well come to school and at least join in club activities."

"Who do you think you're kidding? You think you can take that attitude with me?"

Kume responded to Doigaki's half-assed response with a look of utter contempt and a stream of invective. When he paused for breath, he finally noticed Gotouda standing next to him.

Gotouda bowed his head, mumbling a greeting. Kume slowly looked him over, then lowered his voice. "Who're you?"

"Who, me?"

Rei closed his eyes, imagining Gotouda whipping out his police badge again by way of introduction. But the next line that came out of Gotouda's mouth took them all by surprise.

"I'm Rei's uncle."

"Uncle?"

They all reeled at Gotouda's blatant lie.

"Yeah. Actually, his father asked me to speak with him," Gotouda went on, ignoring the boys' reaction. "Kid gets in trouble with the police, gets suspended from school, and all he does is mope around. Locks himself in his room and won't say a word to his parents. His father asked me to have a good talk with the boy and give him some advice."

"And why are you here?"

"What?"

"If you want to have a talk with him and advise him, you can do that at home, can't you?"

"No. That is to say, according to the boy, I won't understand if I just talk with him. Says I've got to hear his friends out, too. That's why I asked them to come to this meeting." With a cheesy wink, he added, "Isn't that right, boys?"

Kume wasn't a subtle type—he was the kind that would call them into his office and harangue them for hours, and then always treat them to a bowl of takeout pork-cutlet with rice. Still, even if he was a complete simpleton, Rei doubted that he could be made to swallow such a blatantly false story.

As the boys looked on tensely, Kume glared into Gotouda's face. Just then, the music that meant it was time to go home began to blare over the playing field's sound system. Kume spoke over the music.

"Rei's uncle, was it?"

"Yes."

"We can't have this. Visitors are not allowed on campus without permission. And we can't have a suspended student wandering around the school grounds. What kind of example does that set for the other students?"

"I'll take him home right away."

"Please do." As a parting shot, Kume called out, "That goes for the rest of you, too!"

Gotouda watched as Kume disappeared down the staircase, then closed the door.

"What's wrong?" Gotouda asked, looking back at the group's bewildered expressions.

"I had no idea that Kume was that stupid!" Rei said, unable to hide his incredulity. "Even a child wouldn't believe a lie like that."

"That man is no fool," Gotouda replied, seriously. "I don't know what you boys think of him, but that's one savvy, intelligent person. He tried bursting in here with his fists flying, but when he saw an outsider present,

it was too late to back down. He was trapped. By the look of it, he figured out who I really was, too. I offered him a way out, and he jumped at it. A fool doesn't know how to retreat, and he doesn't know when to do it, either." Gotouda grinned, wrinkling up the corners of his eyes, and managed to look surprisingly friendly. "Well? What should we do? Shall we retire and continue our discussion elsewhere?"

Never mind that you're an intruder who takes advantage of an unexpected situation, creates a false sense of fraternity, corners your market, and shifts immediately on to your main agenda, Rei thought, amazed by the man's ingenuity.

"We still haven't decided whether we're going to work with you. And you should know that even if we do, that doesn't make us friends. It would be a provisional arrangement, just until the case is solved," Shibano warned him, ever cautious. But the group was already decided.

"The maneuver, thing, right? That's just fine," Gotouda said.

As if to shatter the strange calm that had settled among them, Aoki sprang to his feet without a word.

"Aoki!" Shibano called, but Aoki ignored him and headed for the door.

He turned once and gave Gotouda a look, then spun around again and left.

"That asshole. He's been a different person ever since he joined that partisan group."

"Always was pretty dogmatic, though."

The others added their two cents, and, as they all

left their seats, Rei thought he heard a low voice murmur in his ear.

Next to him, Gotouda was whispering something.

“What?”

Rei leaned in closer. This time, he heard it clearly.

TWO

One of the older neighborhoods of Tokyo was located a few minutes away from Shibuya by private railway. There was an upscale shopping street, and, beyond that, a surprisingly quiet residential neighborhood.

Rei and Nabeta were visiting a high school located in this residential area.

As far as university-affiliated high schools go, this school was renown among high school political advocates. It was one of the few schools in Tokyo that had enough members to independently assemble an entire demonstration.

Classes had just let out, and, not only was the school swimming with students who were heading home and kids in sports uniforms getting ready for afterschool activities, it was also, conveniently, a progressive school that did not require a school uniform. Among all the activity, the two visitors had no trouble blending in.

They passed through a long hallway bathed in bright sunlight and emerged into a courtyard in which an old bronze sundial stood. As they walked along the path that encircled the tennis court, Rei and Nabeta couldn't help pausing at the sight of the tennis club girls chasing a yellow ball around the court.

“Man!” Nabeta’s voice sounded like a sigh. Wordlessly, Rei nodded.

This was nothing like their high school.

From a national railway station surrounded by nothing but gangsters and pinball parlors, Rei’s school was a fifteen-minute ride on a dismal green private railway train. Rei’s high school was in an area lined by smallish urban factories and dense rows of pubs much too banal to be called an entertainment district.

A concrete wall surrounded the dusty playing field. They said that the buildings were of the “prefectural school era,” but really they were just old. The campus cafeteria was no more than a shack, and the girls’ uniforms were frumpy.

It wasn’t the kind of place where you’d come across a bronze sundial.

Incredibly enough, across from the school’s back gate there was a bar called the Tropical Fish where a fair number of juvenile delinquents were apprehended every year. Even more incredibly, there was also a strip club nearby of which it was rumored that students who ventured inside while still in school would fail their college entrance exams and have to spend an extra year studying.

If the school had a claim to fame, it was either the number of injuries produced by its sports-day events, its barbarian male cheerleading squad, or the dark-skinned principal whose nickname was Tarzan.

“Tennis courts,” Nabeta muttered. “It’s like we’re on another planet!”

The white tennis outfits were dazzling.

Rei and his crowd scorned the idea of youthfulness, but, as they gazed at the girls, who almost seemed like an entirely different species, they began to feel extremely shabby with their shaggy hairstyles and scruffy jackets.

Their world was one of never-ending struggle against their teachers and hopelessly deadlocked battles at home. If they ventured out into the streets, they were pushed around by the riot police and drenched in rain and mud. Perhaps, if Rei had gone to a school like this one, he might never have gotten involved with political issues, and he might now be singing the praises of youth.

The thought made him feel strangely guilty, and he ducked his head slightly, glancing sideways at Nabeta's face.

Nabeta was watching the girls with his mouth hanging open, his eyes wide like a fish.

Finally, they came to the newspaper club's headquarters. The room was lavish, with an old-fashioned cast-steel window, and it was several times larger than the Social Sci's musty headquarters.

A number of shiny new signs, laminated with imitation Japanese velum, were leaned up against the right-hand wall. In an area set off by lockers at the left of the room, a rotary press whirled airily. The smell of thickly spread ink was fresh in the air.

The students who were sorting printed materials on the big desk in the middle of the room raised their heads when they noticed Rei and Nabeta. One of them, a tall boy, stood up and approached them.

Rei elbowed Nabeta, who was staring rudely at the slogans written in large letters on the walls, and bowed his head.

"We're from K High School ..."

"Miwa and Nabeta. I hear you've been sniffing around all over town."

Rei and Nabeta looked at each other in surprise. The boy smiled and continued.

"I'm told you made an appearance at M University Affiliated High School yesterday. We're in touch with them—friends, you might say. They told us all about you."

"Oh, I see." They hadn't expected this, and Rei gave an expressionless, noncommittal response.

The boy looked at them with amusement and wordlessly motioned them over to a corner of the room.

The sofa had well-worn upholstery and appeared to be a favorite napping spot, with a neatly folded blanket doubling as a cushion. Rei and Nabeta sat facing a table fashioned from a piece of plywood over a row of plastic beer-bottle crates. The boy straddled a folding chair, resting his crossed arms over its back. Rei noticed the boy looking them up and down, apparently with great interest.

In his faded jeans, white basketball shoes, cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and bright orange jacket, the boy looked more like an athlete than an activist. Even Rei could see that he was quite good-looking, the type that would make the girls shriek if he went running around with a rugby ball. In other words, he was the type of guy most resented by his male peers. At the same time, if you put a helmet on his head and a bullhorn in his hand, that would probably make a pretty picture, too.

Rei was reminded of the fact that a good-looking guy can pull off any role. The kind of jerk who'd look great in a white helmet.

"Unfortunately, the committee chairman is away just now, so I'll speak with you instead. My name is Miura. I'm the Chief Secretary."

"Chief Secretary, huh?" Nabeta sighed.

"It's just a title," Miura responded in the same off-hand manner.

Perhaps it was just a title, but in Rei's group, which was only nominally a protest committee and really just a club, there was no committee chairman and no secretariat. Really, they had no idea what sort of role a secretariat might play, but Rei and Nabeta were both deeply impressed by the title of Chief Secretary. The only titled member of their group was Shibano, the self-declared Chief Printer. Compared to the head of a whole secretariat, however, he had about as much authority as a washed-up fanzine printer, turning down manuscripts that didn't cut the mustard.

"So. What is it that you wanted to know?" Miura had the manner of someone consciously acting unconscious of his companions' inferior rank.

"I thought you'd heard all about us," Rei responded brazenly, staring straight at Miura so as not to lose his nerve.

Nabeta was the one who had suggested that they make the rounds and collect information about Saya and the murdered high school activists, leaving the sufficiently motivated Amano and the others to handle the investigation at school. If this had been an internal issue of a political faction, they would have had the authority as a specialized

investigative body to hold hearings and employ other such methods. Had they been university students, they could have gone through various united-front groups and liaison conferences to set up official meetings. In the world of high school activists, there were a few liaison conferences, but their membership was limited. In the situation Rei and Nabeta found themselves in, the only recourse was to take on each organization individually.

They didn't know anyone at the schools Gotouda had listed, so the investigation was catch-as-catch-can, relying solely on their powers of negotiation. Although they were dealing with fellow political activists, there was no direct sense of camaraderie between them, and they weren't about to set off needless alarm bells by recounting their absurd story about a girl with a Japanese sword and a string of bizarre killings.

"They said that apparently members of the SR high school committees are being sniped and have been disappearing. You have a member at your school, and so you've been going around trying to find out whether it's true."

"From what we hear, there was a member at this school, too."

"Yeah. Guy named Seno."

"Miura!" A sharp cry rang out, and one of the boys at the desk stood up.

"What's wrong? These guys came here out of concern for a friend. We can trust them," Miura answered without even turning around.

From his tone of voice, it was clear that Miura didn't trust them one ounce, but, at his word the boy sat back

down in silence. Apparently, Chief Secretary was not an empty title.

"At the very least, if this is a public safety or partisan matter, you could have come up with a better way to approach us, couldn't you?"

"We apologize for barging in on you."

"It's all right. Everyone's just a little on edge right now. We don't mean any harm."

Perhaps they didn't mean any harm, but that didn't mean they weren't on their guard, and this was clear from Miura's manner of speaking.

"It's true that we haven't been able to get in touch with Seno for the past two weeks. Our group is made up of all sorts, too, and I didn't want to go poking around in sectarian business. But his disappearance was inconvenient for us, and I did look into it a bit. According to the school, he's at home, sick. But when I tried calling his house, there was no answer, and when I stopped by to look in on him—"

"You were given the polite brushoff."

"Ah. I see things were the same at M University Affiliated," Miura nodded. He was quick on the uptake. "It is strange. It's such a small sect, and of high school students, no less. I can't imagine how anyone would benefit from snuffing its members."

"We don't know yet that they were snuffed."

"Wait a minute. You said that they were being sniped."

"It's been rumored, that's all. Of course, with all these disappearances ..."

"I suppose it's possible that someone ordered them to go undercover."

“What would they do undercover? A sect that small couldn’t be planning any acts of sabotage or destruction.”

Miura gave a soft snort and changed tack. “Don’t you think you’d do better to ask your friend directly, rather than coming around here? He’s in the same organization, so maybe he’s heard something.”

“You know what they’re like, don’t you?”

“How many have disappeared?”

“Three, that we know of.”

The casual look on Miura’s face disappeared, and he gave a soft grunt and fell into thought.

They had succeeded in shifting Miura’s attention from their behavior to the case itself, but, in terms of the investigation, the only thing they had determined was that Seno had really disappeared.

Nabeta decided it was time to move a step further.

“Did you notice anything out of the ordinary around the time of his disappearance?”

“Seno?” Miura shrugged his shoulders breezily. “One thing I noticed was that after he joined that group, he became an entirely different person. He used to be really active, very involved in spreading the word among his classmates. But he became oddly withdrawn; even his face looked gloomy all the time. I wonder if all SR types are like that.”

“They seem to have that tendency. Strangely obstinate, secretive, and neurotically defensive about their organization.”

Rei’s sympathetic remark unleashed an outpouring from Miura. “At the same time, they’re supposedly a political sect, but don’t you think that their lack of enthusiasm for

organizational activities and theoretical debate calls into question their relevance as a partisan group? Their publications are irregular and they hardly ever hold meetings. If they make an appearance in the streets now and again, they never cut loose, and none of them ever gets arrested. Among us, the more strident types say that they aren't a political organization, they're a cult."

"I'd like to ask you about this girl ..."

The photo Rei held out was the real deal. It had been swiftly procured by Amano, and it was much clearer than the poor copy Gotouda had possessed.

Miura took one look at the photograph, twisted his upper body to face the worktable, and called one of the girls over. Her name was Abe.

Apparently, they had been prepared for this, too.

"She's in Seno's class, so she should remember the transfer student."

The girl took a look at the photograph and nodded her assurance. "Saya Otonashi. She wrote her name with the characters for *small* and *night*."

"Please tell us everything you remember about her."

Rei watched closely so as to catch any emotion that might cross her face, but the girl's expression remained deadpan as she shook her head. "We were in the same class, but only for three days. All I know is that she was pretty."

Abe apologized and gave a slight bow, then returned to the worktable.

There was nothing they could do.

Rei decided it was time to leave. He signaled Nabeta and they both stood up.

“Thank you. You’ve been helpful.”

“I heard something else from the group at M University Affiliated,” Miura called out as they made their way toward the door. “Apparently, some guy has made a public vow to ‘pound out those dogs who are sniffing around, leaking information to public safety.’”

A chill ran through Rei’s body.

Only two days had gone by since they’d begun their efforts. News traveled faster than he had anticipated.

“If I were you, I’d wash my hands of it. I don’t know what your circumstances are, but I think sectarian business should be left to the sect.”

“Our friend is important to us. But we appreciate the concern,” Rei imbued his words with as much confidence as he could muster and turned his back on Miura once more.

The rhythmic hum of the rotary press would continue to ring in his ears for some time.

When they exited the front gate the sky had already begun to darken, and a cool breeze brought tidings of the night.

“That was sketchy,” Nabeta muttered, zipping up his jacket. “‘Pound out the dogs who are sniffing around ...’”

Miura’s warning sat heavy on Rei’s chest, too. He had known that poking around in partisan matters could only cause trouble, but it was unnerving how swift the reaction had been.

Could the warning they had just received through Miura have come from Aoki himself?

Rei had no reason to think so, but the question popped into his mind.

If so, that would mean Aoki had some kind of information related to the incident and was trying to interfere with their activities.

Perhaps Miura had been right. The first thing to do was to hear what Aoki had to say.

Rei had to be home soon. An investigator with a curfew—it sounded like a joke, but that was the reality of being a suspended high school student. Rei was prepared to disregard such restrictions if circumstances dictated, but, for now, with the direction of the investigation still uncertain, he preferred to avoid making matters any more complicated. He would return home by dark.

“Want to get some noodles and then go home?” Rei proposed, and Nabeta concurred. They began to walk, but stopped when they heard someone calling them from behind.

It was Abe.

She had come running after them, and was slightly out of breath when she caught up. “I’m sorry ...” she said, “I couldn’t really speak frankly in there.”

Rei hadn’t noticed back in the clubroom, but now that he was face to face with her, he saw that her slanted eyes were quite striking; she was what they might call a prim young beauty. Her white cheeks were slightly flushed and, above her eyes, her bangs were in disarray, revealing an intelligent-looking forehead.

“Was there something else that you noticed?” Nabeta seemed to have been affected as well, and his voice came out higher than normal. Rei took the opportunity to look at Abe.

“That girl, Saya, is dangerous.”

“Dangerous?”

"No. Not so much dangerous as ... evil, you might say. I have a feeling that we're never going to see Seno again."

"Just a minute. What do you mean by evil?"

"You should keep your distance from her. That's all I wanted to tell you." She excused herself and started to walk away.

"Um, could we get together sometime and talk about this a little more?" Nabeta asked, his voice full of hope.

Abe gave him a forlorn smile.

"Unfortunately, I don't think the circumstances are going to allow that in the near future."

"What on earth is that supposed to mean?" Nabeta persisted.

Rei remembered the strange feeling of tension he had sensed in the room and the array of signs propped against the wall. *Everyone's a little on edge right now*, Miura had said.

"You don't mean—"

Abe gave Rei a sharp look, but her mouth was smiling.

Nabeta looked at them both and caught on. He let out a sharp exhale.

With that, she was gone, but her vivid image lingered. Rei and Nabeta stood there dumbly.

"Man!" Nabeta murmured longingly. "A bronze sundial and tennis courts."

"And that clubroom!"

"An electric rotary press and all those signs!"

"Their Chief Secretary was handsome."

"That girl was something else."

"A barricade! Life's not fair!"

Barricading referred to the practice of building a blockade, sealing off and occupying a factory, school, or other

such building. It was used regularly at universities all over the country, and was the calling card of antiestablishment movements. It was an illegal maneuver, labeled “forcible obstruction of a business” or “illegal building occupation,” and the people fortified inside ran the risk of being rounded up wholesale. At the same time, to Rei and his friends, it was the only way to symbolically break free of their everyday world, and it represented a tremendous aspiration to them. However, to maintain such an occupation for any length of time required a major force with a strong support network, making it a formidable maneuver to pull off, let alone sustain at the high school level. To Rei’s group, which didn’t have enough members for a demonstration, let alone a barricade, it was a remote fantasy.

Rei and Nabeta lingered at the front gate, savoring the desperate image conjured up by the word barricade.

What did they have to go back to? A dusty school, unbearable teachers, a grimy clubroom, mimeographed handbills, and a life of skulking around like thieves. Of course, it wasn’t a world where they’d ever encounter a girl like Abe.

Rei and Nabeta both felt that they absolutely needed a bowl of ramen noodles to keep them going.

Two days later, the television stations and newspapers ran stories about a barricade at T University Affiliated High School.

THREE

Evil, huh?" Gotouda muttered. His chopsticks with their load of *kimchi* stopped midair. "Sounds like an insightful girl. What did you say her name was?"

"Abe. I don't know if it's her real name or not." Nabeta's tone was aloof.

"Wish I could meet her." Gotouda loaded the *kimchi* into his mouth and followed it with beer.

The air in the Korean barbecue joint was thick with greasy smoke. It was still early, and they were the only customers in the place.

The restaurant was called the Pear Blossom Garden and was located on a shopping-district side street, about ten minutes from Rei's school. It was known as a place where you could get large servings on the cheap.

When Gotouda had called him, Rei had chosen to meet him here because he didn't expect much from a lowly detective's pocketbook, but also because he liked the restaurant's management style—they'd serve beer even to teenagers wearing school uniforms. Beyond the tables for four, the small restaurant had a *tatami*-mat room in the back that could seat ten in a pinch, and this was the only place where they could smoke without being admonished.

Once, Nabeta had gotten carried away and ordered liquor, and the owner had come out of the kitchen carrying a knife and scared the hell out of all of them, so Rei knew that there were limits to what they could get away with.

In the back room, the group was sipping beer and sending up great clouds of cigarette smoke. But, from Gotouda's age and bedraggled features, given sufficient effort and imagination, they could have passed for a literary circle accompanied by their advisory teacher.

"Well, you can't meet her," Rei declared, moving his chopsticks quickly and keeping his eyes on the remaining meat piled on the big serving plate.

"Was she good-looking?"

"She was my type, to tell the truth," Nabeta said.

"Thin, fair-skinned, with slanted eyes," Rei said.

"T University Affiliated, huh? I'll keep my eye out for her in the demonstrations."

"We're telling you, you won't be seeing her at any demonstrations, on the streets, or anywhere else for quite a while," Doigaki said.

"The cops'll move in, arrest them, hold them in custody ... it'll be some time before she's at large again."

"I'd get arrested for her," Nabeta murmured in an oddly brooding tone. Amano stopped eating and inhaled sharply.

"It's true, she was the kind of girl that made you feel that way," Rei confirmed.

"Ooooh!" Amano let out a sudden roar and a yell. "MAAAAAAN!"

"WILL YOU GUYS SHUT UP!" Shibano roared, breaking his silence. "I don't want to hear your personal

issues about how starved for girls you are! Nabeta, you get Amano all worked up with your suggestive comments, and then the discussion deteriorates!" Always meticulous, Shibano arranged his meat in neat rows on the charred grill and continued speaking in an oddly worldly tone. "There'll always be people out there who have more than you. The only inequalities are wealth and culture. In a conflict environment where economic disparities exist, regional disparities exist, too. Who gives a shit about barricades and girls you would get arrested for and electric rotary presses! There'll always be people out there who have more than you!"

He didn't add, *all we have is greasy Korean barbecue and a mimeograph machine*, but his unspoken anger was tangible to Rei and the others. To the dispassionate listener, it was obvious that he was merely blaming his foul mood on Nabeta and Amano's wistful expressions of longing, but Shibano himself didn't seem to have noticed. Apparently, their report had elicited the same frustration with their circumstances in Shibano, too.

The group hung their heads. On the tabletop, as if to personify their emotional state, the meat smoldered, its fat sizzling away.

"Listen, I can understand why you guys might feel discouraged—" Gotouda began.

"You can *what*?" Shibano snapped, as if to say, *you don't understand shit!*

"Come now, don't get upset!" Gotouda's words were sympathetic, but they were tempered by his obvious amusement at Shibano's reaction. "Let's get down to business."

"Let's take our time and talk as we eat ... uh-oh, there's no more meat," Murano said, narrowing his eyes. "Mind if I order some more?"

"Listen, my wallet isn't a bottomless treasure trove, and I'm not working with an expense account here."

"Waitress!" Murano called, and he and Rei mercilessly showered her with orders.

"Family-size order of short ribs for ten!"

"Roast for ten!"

"Salted tongue and marinated tongue, three portions each."

"*Kimchi* and *ggaktugi*!"

"And a large bowl of *namuru*!"

Gotouda ordered five bowls of rice, thinking that he'd go bankrupt if he tried to fill them up with just meat, but he ended up digging his own grave.

"I'd prefer *somen* noodles, please."

"I'll have *somen*, too."

"One large *bibimbap* with soup."

"One large *yukke bibimbap* with soup."

The waitress took down their orders and stood up to go. Amano called after her, "and five more beers!"

"Let's go over the report," Shibano began to direct the group again, completely ignoring Gotouda, whose expression had hardened. "Miwa and Nabeta have confirmed the disappearance of Hayashida of M University Affiliated High School, Seno of T University Affiliated High School, and Koda of N Industrial High School."

"The dates they disappeared were the same ones Old Fogey here told us," Nabeta said, stirring a small dish of sauce with his chopsticks.

“But it’s still too soon to conclude that they were killed. We can’t eliminate the possibility that they might have run away from home, or gone undercover.”

Gotouda held out a file bound with string to the ever-cautious Shibano. The label on the front of its black cover read “postmortem certificate.”

In addition to natural deaths and deaths from illness, there were also exogenous deaths, or deaths that were caused by external forces. Under the medical examiner system, these deaths were considered unnatural deaths, and an unnatural-death report had to be filed with the police. The police would then conduct an autopsy, but this was supported from a clinical standpoint by a medical examiner’s autopsy, or postmortem examination. The medical examiner could also decide to call for an administrative autopsy. If this was conducted at the order of a detective, it was referred to as a judicial autopsy.

The report in front of Shibano at that moment, if they were to believe Gotouda’s story, was a judicial autopsy.

“The postmortem certificates of the three victims. I had a hell of a time getting a hold of these for you cynics. I have to warn you, though. If you don’t want all the food you just ordered to go to waste, I’d wait until after you’ve eaten.”

Shibano gave a snort of laughter and opened the file. His face contorted, and Amano, who was looking over his shoulder, let out a rueful moan. “Ohhhh, SHIT!”

“What proof do we have that these are the bodies of the three guys that disappeared?” At this point, it was clear that he was just being obstinate, but Shibano gave one last show of resistance.

"I reckon we could find out if we showed these photographs to their classmates."

"You dumbass! Where would we tell them we got these pictures?" Doigaki cringed at Amano's blithe suggestion. "Try telling them you borrowed them from a friend who's a cop. You'd be lucky if you escaped with an ass-kicking."

"They'd beat you half to death," Nabeta said.

The file was passed from the wide-eyed Amano to Doigaki, Nabeta, and then to Rei.

The photos appeared to have been taken under a surgical lamp; there was very little shadow present. To Rei, this gave them an oddly surreal quality. Aside from the straight suture that ran down from their throats, the only indication that the bodies were dead was the expressionless look, characteristic of rigor mortis, that they wore on their faces.

"Maybe we should make some copies of these just in case."

"I can't let you do that. Even the fact that I've brought these out and shown them to you would get me more than just a warning." Hastily, he took the documents back from Rei and put them carefully away in his bag.

"If they find out about this, you'll be fired anyway."

"I know you kids don't understand, but I'm too old to start over from scratch. My job's not much, but I still prefer to pick and choose the issues over which I'm willing to gamble it."

"Oh, well. For now, we'll accept that the three in question were killed, and in an exceedingly grotesque manner, no less," Shibano said magnanimously. The rest of the group voiced their assent.

Really, it was pretty arrogant and insolent of them. A bunch of high school kids recognizing something as fact wasn't worth much, but Gotouda nodded, satisfied.

"Okay. Next, let's have the school report. Doigaki?"

At Shibano's prompting, Doigaki took a file out of his shoulder bag and opened it up on the table as Amano moved the plates of meat aside. The photos that Amano had taken were neatly arranged and pasted inside, with captions underneath written in a small hand that must have been Doigaki's.

"Whoa!" Rei let out an exclamation of admiration, as did Gotouda.

"Nice work!" Shibano said.

"It wasn't easy," Doigaki responded. He opened his notebook and began his report. "Saya Otonashi, age seventeen. According to the documents attached to her transfer paperwork, her permanent address and present residence are—"

"Just a minute," Rei interrupted, surprised. "How did you find that out?"

"I snuck into the school office and had a look at the file in her homeroom teacher's desk. I've got a copy here, too, in the back of the folder."

"Hold on. Who told you to do that?" Shibano raised his voice angrily. "What if they found us out?"

"It's okay! All I did was make a copy and put it back!"

"I'll have a look into it, but it's probably all garbage." Gotouda ignored their bickering as he looked through the file, making notes in his notebook. "How're things looking at school?"

"According to the other kids in her class, she's quiet. She doesn't talk to anybody, and nobody talks to

her. She's never absent or tardy, and she's attentive in class. In particular, she's fluent in English and, apparently, when Shibasaki asked her a question, she corrected his pronunciation and completely embarrassed him. Some think she might be a returnee who's been living overseas. But she doesn't participate in gym—"

"Must be her period," Amano said.

"How come nobody talks to her? A pretty girl like that?" Shibano questioned, ignoring Amano's comment.

"They say she's somewhat unapproachable. They try to talk to her, but when she's standing in front of them—"

"They freeze up."

Doigaki looked at Rei in surprise. "Yeah, that's what they said."

"Like a deer in the headlights," Shibano suggested.

"No, not exactly," Rei corrected. "More like a person who encounters a wolf in a dark forest."

"Oh? And have you ever encountered a wolf in a dark forest?"

"Yeah. But it wasn't in a dark forest," Rei answered, meeting Shibano's gaze.

Shibano scowled at him, but, when he saw that Rei's look was not one of rebellion but of fright, he shrugged his shoulders and looked away. "Evil, huh?" He crossed his arms and echoed Gotouda's remark. "I guess that's what that Abe girl was talking about."

A beautiful transfer student who was secretly evil. Spoken aloud, it sounded like a big joke. But it wasn't something they could just laugh off—given the fact she was there at their school, she was connected to a murder

case, and among them there were both a witness of what resembled a crime scene and a potential next victim.

While they still found the facts of the case somewhat difficult to believe, there was a dangerous similarity between reality and the words they were hearing, and this was disconcerting to Shibano and the others.

"But listen. If she has a period, at least we know she's human," Amano put in.

"Haven't I told you to quit saying every little thing that pops into your head?" Shibano roared back.

Gotouda had been poring over the contents of the file, but he now closed it. "We still don't have anything concrete on this girl called Saya. Only a vague image," he stated, as if declaring a verdict. "We have enough photos here to feed a horse, but there's no new connection to the facts. Nothing worth the price of the film processing."

"How about this, then?" Doigaki said, his expression defiant. He took several other photographs out of his school uniform shirt pocket and threw them down on the table as if playing his trump card.

Rei's face grew stern as he hastily snatched up the images.

One showed Saya getting into a black, foreign automobile. Next to the car stood two men in black suits. The rest of the photos were shots of the two men taken through a telephoto lens.

Amano wasn't the most discreet guy around, but he was a solid photographer.

A tall, older man and a muscular middle-aged man ... It was the pair of foreigners that Rei had seen that night. "I'm sure of it. That's them."

When they heard Rei's low murmur, Doigaki and Amano exchanged pleased smiles and shook hands.

"If nothing else, this proves that Miwa's story was true," Doigaki declared, puffing out his chest with pride.

"Way to beat around the bush! Why didn't you show us earlier!" Shibano's words were reproachful, but his expression was one of relief. They'd had a friend's word, but it wasn't a story that was easy to swallow outright. Concrete proof was a definite step forward.

"That Saya girl is somebody, all right. She gets a ride to and from school in this outrageous foreign car, though of course they're discreet enough not to pull up to the front gate. And with bodyguards, no less!"

"Did you tail her?" Shibano poured more beer into Doigaki's cup.

"Who do you think I am, Abebe Bikila?" He savored his beer and continued. "Get me a motorcycle and I'll do it tomorrow."

"That won't be necessary," Gotouda interjected, gazing at the photographs they had handed him. He passed them back to the bewildered boys.

"Your powers of observation still aren't up to scratch. Look closer." He tapped one of the photographs with a nicotine-stained fingernail.

"It's got a foreign service number!" Doigaki exclaimed.

"A foreign service number?" Amano asked.

"It means the car belongs to an embassy, dummy," Shibano told him.

"Did you already know that?" Rei asked.

"Listen, I haven't just been sitting on my ass, either.

Don't forget that I'm a detective."

Doigaki's expression clouded, and Amano humbly refilled Gotouda's beer.

"And? Where do they go?"

Gotouda drained his glass before answering. "I'm no Abebe Bikila, either."

The group released a chorus of groans, and Doigaki barked, "You talk like you're such hot shit, but you're no better than the rest of us!"

"This is where you start to see the difference between you amateurs and myself," Gotouda replied, leafing through his notebook. "That number is registered as a public vehicle of the Embassy of Israel. However, the two men are not embassy officials, nor are they staff."

This unexpected development caused a stir among the boys, and a shock of tension entered their expressions.

"Is that true?"

"Like, *Israel*, Israel?"

"Heavy."

Of course, neither Rei nor Shibano knew exactly what was heavy about it, but, in the midst of a situation that was still vague at best, the sudden emergence of the word Israel came as something as a shock.

A chain of murders targeting high school student activists ... a freakish *modus operandi* ... an inscrutable partisan faction associated with the victims ... and a transfer student who consistently materialized before each incident—the links should fit together, but so far they didn't. Now, there was a new puzzle piece that moved matters into an entirely different arena.

Things seemed to have reached a level beyond the ken of Gotouda, who was just a lowly detective, never mind Rei and the others, who were mere high school students. But the situation was being played out at their school right now. Moreover, not only Rei, a witness of the case, but also Shibano and the others had allied themselves with Gotouda, despite the fact that, far from being model students, they were political extremists. The whole situation represented a major departure from their ordinary lives. Thus, they possessed a sort of nihilism unique to nonpartisans with nothing to lose, and this perhaps numbed the sense of danger that might otherwise have counteracted their curiosity.

It was bizarre that Gotouda was absolutely fine with involving a group of high school kids, albeit political extremists, to such an extent. This demonstrated a kind of psychological character that was definitely out of the ordinary, and, when taken with the fact that he was a detective by profession, downright abnormal.

Their arguments continued to escalate, as if to keep pace with the situation as it grew increasingly more convoluted.

"So the Israelis are behind this Saya girl."

"Just because a car belonging to their embassy brings her to and from school doesn't necessarily mean she's working for Israeli national interests."

"She must be a Japanese Jew!"

"Do we even know that she's Japanese?"

"She looks foreign."

"But can you even be admitted to a municipal high school without Japanese citizenship?"

"Don't you think it's a little strange that her registration form is filled out with complete garbage?"

"The Board of Ed needs to tighten its watch!"

"That's an antirevolutionary statement!"

"You know, if we're willing to butt in on a police investigation, it'd probably be easier to just put pressure on the Board of Education."

"Yeah, this must be one of those crimes against the authority of the state."

"If Israel's involved, it might be an international plot."

"I'VE GOT IT!" Amano shouted. "Those guys are Mossad saboteurs and she's an assassin!"

"HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU NOT TO BLURT OUT EVERYTHING THAT POPS INTO YOUR HEAD!"

"The Mossad has their hands full with Arab guerrillas and Nazis. They don't have the leisure to be killing off radical leftist high school students in democratic nations of the Far East."

"Why the hell would a Mossad assassin be wielding a Japanese sword?"

"I've got it," Amano said again.

"Will you shut up!"

"Shibano, don't be a dictator."

"Even Amano has the right to speak."

"Don't Bonaparte!"

The expression "to Bonaparte" came from the concept of Bonapartism and referred to the quality of having authoritarian tendencies. It was used conversationally to mean roughly, *don't act so big* or *don't be bossy*.

“Okay, okay, let’s hear it. But make it quick.”

“The two of them are CIA agents!”

“I told you we shouldn’t let him talk!” Shibano exploded for the umpteenth time that day. But even he had no illusions of steering the discussion in a productive direction, and in the end they all fell silent.

“Hey,” Rei said to Gotouda. “What do you think?”

“What do I think about who Saya is? Or what do I think about the case in general?”

“Either.”

Gotouda had been leaning back against the wall, listening to the boys argue. He now straightened up, and they all turned to listen.

“Hmm. Why don’t we eat some barbecue and give it some more thought? The food’s here.”

A family-sized order of short ribs for ten.

Roast for ten.

Three portions each of salted tongue and marinated tongue.

Two orders of *kimchi* and *ggaktugi*.

One large *namuru*.

Two bowls of *somen* noodles.

One large *bibimbap* with soup.

One large *yukke bibimbap* with soup.

Five beers.

With so many dishes packed together on the table, the spread resembled an old-fashioned Chinese banquet. At a cheap-eats dive like the Pear Blossom Garden, they didn’t bother with such frills as timing each dish to keep pace with the customers’ rate of consumption; it was the diner’s responsibility to plan out the course of his own meal.

Thus, although one would normally save *somen* noodles for the end of a meal, Rei and Nabeta were now occupied with the difficulties of slurping their noodles and juggling their barbecue at the same time.

Meanwhile, Shibano approached his food the same way he approached a discussion, preferring to command centralized foods like the barbecue and hot pots, and arranging the squares of meat neatly on the square grill.

"In any event, we don't have enough information," he concluded.

Amano and Doigaki had ordered the *kuppa* and *bibimbap*, dishes that they could afford to let sit a while. They took their time drinking their beers and waiting for the meat to cook as they listened to Shibano speak.

"The only way to solve this case is to understand its substance—its true nature, if you will. When I say solve, from our ideological standpoint, I don't mean the act of protecting the SR Faction's high school group. The primary issue, which also constitutes our objective, is to prevent the death of Shouji Aoki, a member of our protest committee. Moreover, our alliance with a certain Gotouda in this investigation hinges on the assumption that the crimes pertain to political sabotage or an international plot involving activities hostile to the New Leftist Movement in this country. If we learn that these crimes simply stem from personal grudges, or mental illness, and are apolitical in nature, our involvement ends there. Is everyone with me so far?"

Nabeta, Doigaki, and Amano nodded their assent immediately, and Rei nodded, too, after a moment's thought.

"Right, the maneuver. We understand already," Gotouda muttered impatiently.

"The question is what direction to take to further our information-gathering activities. Suggestions?" Shibano asked, ignoring Gotouda.

"I think the meat's cooked."

"Let's talk as we eat."

The group descended upon the food, and Shibano filled the emptied grill with new strips of meat. Of course, the speed of their consumption was faster than the meat could be replenished, so rather than talking as they ate, the inevitable rhythm was one of dialogue interspersed with bursts of eating.

"There's a limit to what we can do outside of school. We're not conditioned to it, and I doubt there's much we can do in terms of investigating the embassy, which is our only lead right now." Nabeta stuffed several strips of meat into his mouth and chewed vigorously.

"How did you find all that out so quickly?"

"I asked around at the External Affairs Division," Gotouda answered, helping himself to more beer.

"The External Affairs Division would be part of the Public Safety Department, wouldn't it? I thought you hated those guys," Rei said.

Gotouda looked at Rei with surprise and put down his cup. "I have a friend there who owed me a little favor. I assume you know that they regularly monitor embassy personnel?"

"I see," Rei responded neutrally, but something didn't quite seem right to him.

"What a pro!" Amano blurted out.

"We'll have to leave that part of the investigation to you," Shibano said, and Rei had no choice but to concur. They had no idea how to approach an embassy. "As far as the on-campus investigation goes ... the key player is really Aoki himself," Shibano ventured.

"He comes to school everyday like he couldn't care less. Guy's got balls."

"Since when did he get so tough?"

"He always did like talking about blood, though, trials or sanctions or whatever."

As he listened to Shibano and the others talking, Rei began to think about Aoki again.

Shouji Aoki was a member of Social Sci, but, like Rei, he was something of a ghost member. Up until about a year ago, he had belonged to the Soccer Club, and he'd generally seemed like a typical sweaty-smelling jock. He'd joined their group after Rei had a run-in with Aoki's homeroom teacher.

On the day of the run-in, Rei and the others had gone around to each homeroom recruiting marchers for the antiwar demonstrations. Aoki's teacher happened to be present, and they'd gotten into an argument. The teacher had screamed at them all to shut up and study, and Aoki had exploded and screamed back.

"LET THEM HAVE THEIR SAY!" he'd shouted, advancing on the homeroom teacher. Rei and the others were stunned. If they hadn't held Aoki back, he would have punched the teacher.

What anguish had Aoki suffered as he kicked the soccer ball around the playing field? It was difficult for

Rei and the others to imagine. But after that incident, they invited him to join the group. Aoki began to show up at the clubroom now and again. Soon, he had forsaken the life of cramming for college entrance exams. He was impulsive and hot-blooded, and often his actions elicited criticism from the others, but Rei was not put off by Aoki's somewhat childish sense of justice. It was when Aoki joined the SR Faction that he began to change, developing an unusually somber aspect, and speaking and behaving in a way that distanced him from the others.

Rei and the rest were nonpartisans and were thus very open-minded when one of their members joined a specific partisan faction. In order to sustain such a piecemeal group, they saw maintaining interpersonal balance as their first priority, setting aside individual differences in ideology. Aoki's arrogant attitude the other day in the clubroom was very much out of step with the environment the group had strived to build, and it was not surprising that the remarks now being made about his character were less than complimentary.

I have a feeling we're never going to see Seno again, Abe had said.

Secretly, it had occurred to Rei, too, that Aoki might never return to their group. The cold stare Rei had felt from Aoki that day had not been the kind that usually passes between two human beings. It wasn't a simple matter of conflicting ideology ... it was as if Aoki had become a different person. Rei had no idea what might have the power to transform a person so completely.

"What if he refuses to come in and talk to us?"

“Stage an inquisition?”

“We can’t all gang up on him.”

“No one’s suggesting that. We just want to question him.”

“How is that different from an inquisition?”

The discussion seemed to have come to rest on the topic of how to get information from Aoki.

“We won’t get anywhere just arguing in circles. For starters, I’ll approach Aoki and try to talk to him. How about that?”

“I’m happy to leave it to you, Shibano. I can’t deal with that guy.” This was from Nabeta, who had never gotten along with Aoki. Doigaki and Amano concurred.

“Miwa, is that cool with you?”

“Yeah. You take care of it.”

Rei was relieved to hear that Shibano would be shouldering the task.

Am I afraid of Aoki? he wondered.

What was the true threat—Aoki, or whatever it was that had transformed him?

“I’d like to review our plan of action. Doigaki and Amano will continue to tail the girl. But as far as off-campus stuff goes, we’ll leave that to the Old Fogey here. I’ll approach Aoki. Miwa and Nabeta—”

“There’s one thing that bothers me,” Rei interrupted, cutting Shibano short.

“What is it? Do you have a suggestion?”

“You think we should stage an inquisition for the girl, too?”

“You dumbass. Don’t forget about the sword!”

“She wouldn’t go swinging that thing around at school.”

"Yeah, but she could spring it on you at night on the streets."

"Would you please all shut up!" Shibano shouted down Doigaki and the others. "What is it, Miwa?"

"The motive."

Gotouda, who had tired of the boys' endless discussion and was smoking a cigarette, twisted his mouth into a smile. "Shibano was right that in order to solve a case, you have to understand the facts. But there's another angle you have to address, too, is there not? The true nature of the crime hinges on the motive. Very good." Gotouda spoke as if he were teacher leading a class discussion. "Please go on."

Gotouda, who until now had listened on in silence, seemed to have taken an interest in Rei's statement. As he continued, Rei was plagued by uncertainty as to Gotouda's true intentions. "Since this is a murder case, there has to be a clue as to the motive in the way the victims were killed. If nothing else, it makes sense to assume that there is a reason that all three were killed using the same elaborate method."

"A vendetta? Revenge? Intimidation?"

"None of those seems quite right," Rei said. "Draining someone's blood is insidious, but it's not particularly dramatic or persuasive."

"The murderer was probably some kind of deviant."

"It may be true that the way they were killed holds the key to the motive, but the draining of somebody's blood is itself so freakish that I don't have the foggiest clue."

"Yeah, we're back to square one. I can't see how this is productive," Shibano concluded.

"Why don't you let him finish?" Gotouda spoke up again, disgusted.

"I don't think we can directly figure out the motive based on the way they were killed," Rei continued. "But if nothing else, from the peculiarity and similarities of the killings, we can speculate that there is a high probability that they were committed by the same perpetrator. Are you with me so far?"

"Where are you going with this?" Doigaki asked.

"Get to the point!"

"Hang in there. Listen. When we look at these murders, we shouldn't just focus their similarities. We should pay just as much attention to their differences, as well."

"What do you mean?" Amano said.

"Can you be more specific?" Shibano said.

"I'm talking about all of the crimes. You may have forgotten, but I saw that girl at the scene of a killing. The three murders might be the same, but that girl, Saya, has a different way of killing. Almost the opposite, I'd say."

"Blood draining versus blood splattering," Doigaki agreed.

"Those are pretty opposite," Shibano confirmed.

"But what of it?"

Rei was irritated at their dull reactions, but, at the same time, what had begun as a tiny epiphany began to take a clear form as he put it into words. "Listen. The most important thing is that if the murders were different, then perhaps the motives were different, too."

"Oh!" Nabeta let out a little exclamation.

"Maybe the difference between the two is a clue as to the case's true nature."

"So you're saying—"

Rei interrupted Nabeta, who seemed to have finally figured out what he was getting at, and wrapped up.

"I'm saying that maybe the perpetrator of the murder cases is someone completely separate from Saya and the two foreigners."

He looked at the group to gauge their reaction to his words.

Doigaki and Shibano were staring at him, their chopsticks frozen in midair. Nabeta was holding his head in his hands.

"Um, so, what does that mean?" Amano, still in the dark, peered into Shibano's face.

"Listen! Miwa is saying that maybe it wasn't Saya who killed those three guys!"

"She appeared every time right before the three victims disappeared, and after the incidents she was gone. That's already suspicious, but then she shows up at our school. Moreover, she transfers into Aoki's class, and he belongs to the same faction as the three victims. This blinded us into directly linking that girl to the three murder victims. It was careless of us," Rei said, sighing and raising his beer to his lips.

He heard someone applaud.

"Well done. Not bad for a high school kid!"

The entire group turned to look at Gotouda, who was smiling in satisfaction and clapping his hands.

"But you still only get fifty points."

"What are you saying, Old Fogey?" Nabeta glared at Gotouda.

"After all, if you take a cool look at the available information, it's an obvious possibility. Besides, don't you

think it's pathetic that the only person who's witnessed Saya in action didn't figure that out earlier?"

Rei's soaring spirits plummeted.

He saw now that Gotouda was right, and there was nothing he could say in argument.

"Besides, a murder motive isn't only evident in the manner of the killing. There's another place to look for it, too. Does anyone know where?"

Rei and the others exchanged looks, but for a moment nobody said anything.

"The stiff. The dead body," Gotouda said happily. "More specifically, the circumstances in which the bodies were found. I know it's not the best topic to talk about over a barbeque dinner, but would you like to hear more?"

"We can stomach it!" Shibano said rebelliously, and the others agreed.

"Are you sure?"

"Bring it on!" Nabeta loaded a big pile of short ribs onto the grill, sending up a dense cloud of smoke.

"Okay. I'll tell you." Gotouda lit an Echo and began to speak.

"Before we talk about how criminals deal with dead bodies, you first have to understand why we have to dispose of dead bodies in the first place. In fact, it can be said that human history is the history of the struggle to cope with the dead."

"We're talking about history now?" Doigaki said.

"Sounds like we're in for a long lecture," Nabeta said.

As if to back up these words, Gotouda poured himself another beer as he continued. "Death from illness, natural death, accidental death, murder, war ... regardless of the

cause of death, we have to recover bodies and dispose of them. Do you know why?"

"Because they'll rot."

"It's unhygienic."

"They spread contagious diseases."

"They're dirty and they smell bad."

"Is that all?" Gotouda asked.

"To conceal evidence. To slow down an investigation—"

"We'll get into that later. I'm talking about the more general disposal of dead bodies."

"Moral issues. Leaving corpses lying around violates public mores, as well as issues of human respect."

"Hygiene, morals, human respect ... anything else?"

The boys looked at each other, lost.

Impatient as usual, Shibano began to fidget irritably. Doigaki stuck a cigarette in his mouth.

Rei, too, was at a loss as to what Gotouda was driving at.

"I've got it!" Amano raised his hand. "Because they're scary!"

A sinister smile appeared on Gotouda's face. "Scary? What's scary?" he prompted.

"Dead bodies."

"What's scary about them?"

Silence. Amano, unable to answer, looked to the others for help, but, of course, nobody said a word.

"People are scared that dead bodies will open their eyes, stand up, walk around ... in other words, people are scared that dead bodies will come back to life, don't you think?" Gotouda stated pedantically, like a teacher speaking to an especially dull student. Amano nodded enthusiastically.

Gotouda rolled his eyes and drank his beer down with satisfaction.

Shibano couldn't take it anymore. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about what people are afraid of that makes them want to dispose of dead bodies. That's what I'm talking about." Gotouda refilled his empty glass with beer, paying not the slightest attention to Shibano's irritation. He continued, "Hygiene, morals, human respect ... those are all concepts that were born in the last few centuries. In pre-industrialized cultures—not so long ago—how did people in preliterate societies understand death? People didn't even understand the rudiments of physiology, pathology, or immunology. So how did people explain sickness and death?"

"Demons? The Grim Reaper?" Amano, Gotouda's most enthusiastic student, leaned forward as he replied. Gotouda smiled benevolently. If he wasn't a middle-aged gumshoe with a beer in his hand, it would have looked like a heartwarming instructor-pupil exchange.

"Not quite. Demons are only concerned with the corruption of the human soul. Deities have a monopoly on sacraments related to death. Also, that sort of Christian ideology was limited to the European world, and, even there, they were aristocratic conceptions prevalent only within the very limited realm that constituted the privileged classes. No, the people of those days needed a simpler, more convincing explanation."

Gotouda reached out for some *kimchi* from the small jar and stuffed it into his mouth. The bargain-basement

kimchi relied exclusively on spiciness as seasoning, and it sent Gotouda into a fit of coughing as he continued.

“Mass deaths caused by plagues and infectious diseases; mysterious deaths resulting from genetic problems; unforeseeable deaths from natural phenomena such as lightning or falling rocks; natural death, which comes to call after a long and gradual decline ... the world was exposed to death in its infinite variety, and people needed an explanation to deal with the inconvenience, as well as the fear and social anxiety that it elicited. As I’ve already stated, we’re talking about an era in which the science of pathology didn’t even exist, let alone the medical examiner system. People could understand murder or death on the battlefield—death that resulted from someone’s deliberate malicious intent. But what they couldn’t understand was death that was a function of natural or cosmic laws. Death wasn’t something that just *happened*, it had to be brought about by somebody. What was the easiest and most convincing explanation? It was to blame death on the dead person.”

“But that’s backwards,” Shibano objected. He was cooking the meat and working on his *yukke bibimbap* when his hands were free. “Even if scientific thought wasn’t widespread yet, they had logic, right? Dead bodies are the result of death, not the other way around.”

“Logical thinking doesn’t mean that people necessarily follow the same path in an argument and arrive at the same conclusion.” Gotouda, enticed by Shibano’s *yukke bibimbap*, reached for the plate of *namuru*. “In this case, there were two cognitive biases that influenced their reasoning. In other words ... if two events occurred in their

lives, the first was seen to be the cause of the second. In this case, the first event was the appearance of a corpse, the second event was the death that was brought about afterwards." He elevated the dish of *namuru* as if offering it up for consecration and recited, "*Post hoc ergo propter hoc*—after this, therefore, because of this."

"What the hell does that mean?" Shibano demanded.

"It's the same logical process you all used to connect Saya's appearance to the death of the three victims," Gotouda said, proceeding to stuff his mouth full of *namuru*. Shibano wore a look of unmasked disgust.

"What do you mean, the appearance of a corpse?" Amano asked.

"Exactly what I said. All around the world, in a wide variety of cultures, there were dead people, but there were also things that come back from the grave and brought death to friends and family," he said, chewing loudly as he talked. "The Slavs had the *vampyr*. The Russians had the *uppyr*. The Greeks had the *vrykolakas*. The Romanians had the *strigoi*. In Northern Germany they were *nchtzehrer*—"

"Are you talking about vampires?" Amano was looking up from his bowl of *kuppa* with a surprised expression.

"Come on, now, old man ..." Doigaki cut in, setting down his bowl of *bibimbap*.

"If you'll just listen quietly ... vampires were a regional and synoptic way to explain the inexplicable concept of death—a sort of scapegoat, if you will. Driving a stake into a corpse's heart was a symbolic act that represented escaping the threat of death. For example, if you think of the popular idea of vampires—that is, the idea that

people bitten by vampires become vampires themselves—as the old-fashioned way to explain infectious diseases, it makes sense, doesn't it? Naturally, this sort of interpretation is an absurd fallacy to us modern men, but what's interesting about it is that it succeeds in incorporating all of the information that was available to people at that time with no inconsistencies, explaining a lot of universal customs that were difficult to understand even to people of that time ... Of course, that's a whole different topic."

"You had me going there for a minute!" Amano exhaled deeply and returned to the task of inhaling his *kuppa*. "I thought you were talking about the three guys who got killed!"

"Hmm. Well, now that you mention it, it does fit together, doesn't it?" Doigaki nodded soberly. "Bite marks on their wrists and severe blood loss ... in other words, their blood wasn't drained, it was sucked out." He peered at Nabeta, who was sitting across from him.

"That would also explain why there was no trace of blood at the crime scenes," Nabeta said in a low voice, looking back at Doigaki.

Startled, Amano stopped eating, his spoon hanging in the air. "You guys are kidding ... right?"

"Stop talking nonsense and eat this meat before it burns!" At the sound of Shibano's admonition, both Doigaki and Nabeta burst into laughter and reached their chopsticks out for more barbeque.

"You guys!"

"The look on your face was too funny!"

Gotouda, who had been observing the exchange, showed his warped-hyena grin and laughed, too.

What on earth was Gotouda thinking, bringing up a subject like vampires? Again, Rei questioned Gotouda's motives, but he hid his discomfiture by bowing his head over his bowl of somen.

"You said two biases, didn't you?" Shibano asked, beginning the grilling process anew.

"The first was, 'after this, therefore, because of this' ..."

"Yeah, we got that. What's the second?"

"They didn't require a defined number of examples in order to draw a conclusion. One was enough."

"I don't follow you," said Doigaki.

"Explain!" demanded Nabeta.

"For example ... say an arm popped up out of a grave." Gotouda stuck a chopstick in the big pile of roast on the serving dish. "If you think about burial practices of the time, it can't have been that rare. I'll tell you all about it later, but, at the time, digging a deep grave required not only a great deal of labor, but also various topographical conditions. As a result, most graves were shallow, with not a lot of dirt piled on top. If it rained for a while, or if an animal came digging around, the stiff would come right up. But the guy who sees an arm pop out only sees that one stage of the process. An arm sticking out of a grave. There's even a saying that a murderer's arm will rise from the grave, so that means it's a murderer's arm. Dead murderers are the reserve troops of vampires, so this must be the corpse trying to escape from the grave. The guy sees the tracks of a dog or something around the grave. This proves that a vampire has been lurking around, in the form of a beast. You get the idea. Now

what do you think would happen if it wasn't an arm, but the whole half-rotten, grotesque upper body of the corpse that came up?"

Shibano and Doigaki, both with mouths full of meat, stopped chewing.

"Then, the people who hear this story interpret it in various ways, depending on their personal opinions. And ultimately, all kinds of folklore are created ..."

"Basically, there was a lack of information," Shibano voiced his favorite line, having successfully swallowed a mouthful of meat.

"A lack' doesn't really express it. In society at the time, there was no such thing as information that wasn't mixed with subjectivity, and there was very little of the sort of inductive reasoning that allows someone to draw universally applicable conclusions based on commonalities in specialized empirical experiments. The event might consist of one thing, but when this is disseminated through word of mouth, people apply motives to it, they try to make it consistent, and then they exaggerate it when they retell it. Eventually, the story is transformed into something quite different from the original event. To put it another way, it was inevitable that, first, the evidence was interpreted, then, the evidence needed to prove the explanation was added in." Behind the grotesque sculpture he had created from a disposable chopstick and a pile of meat, Gotouda continued in an even more cryptic tone. "I'll tell you something else—it's modern man's arrogance to characterize these ideas as the ignorant ramblings of half-witted plebeians exploited by feudal

lords. No matter how unscientific or illogical they may seem, these ideas represent people of that time's efforts to rationalize an inexplicable situation. What does rationalization mean? You!" He pointed to Amano, who stuttered in surprise. "No. Next!"

"Uh ..." Shibano said.

"No. Next!"

"Eliminate the unnecessary to make something more efficient ..." said Rei.

"I'm asking what it means in this case. Next!"

"Pass," said Nabeta.

"Next!"

"Who knows?" said Doigaki.

He'd stumped them all. Gotouda let out a peculiar titter of laughter. He seemed overjoyed. "Pretty poor show for a bunch of activists. Marx is rolling in his grave."

Shibano shot back angrily, "We're not Marxists!"

"What are you?"

"Well ..."

"We're extremists. Do you have a problem with that?" Rei spoke up for Shibano, glaring at Gotouda. "I have a better question. Are you really a detective?"

"What? Can't a detective talk about sociology? If you think the police force is just a bunch of jocks, that's prejudice. I've just finished explaining how prejudice can lead to an erroneous story. You should be more careful."

"Who asked you? I thought we were talking about the bodies!" Shibano was at the end of his patience.

"Don't shout, dummy. What'll you do if the old man comes out here with his knife?"

“We could get kicked out for good.”

“Get to the point, or forget the alliance.” Shibano’s voice carried repressed rage.

“It means to categorize a matter in a way that does not conflict with one’s perception of the world, explain it, and integrate it with one’s world view ... people of the past, who had no scientific knowledge, had no other basis to explain the mystery and terror of death other than the corpses themselves and their gradual disintegration. Are you with me so far?”

“And?” Shibano prompted.

“The abnormal things that take place as a corpse decomposes and disintegrates—for example, its face swells up, its skin puffs out, blood pours out of the mouth, it changes position in the coffin, the meat peels off, the bones are exposed, the pressure of the gasses emitted causes an embryo to be pushed out of the womb, et cetera. Even if these things are the result of organisms that function as sanitation workers—such as microorganisms, or large predatory animals, or worms and the like—of course they can’t see the microorganisms, and they know very little about how these animals feed. Because it’s difficult to observe that sort of thing, and it’s not really safe, either. For them, there is absolutely no functional distinction between the invisible and the nonexistent. Thus, when someone comes across a body for whatever reason and the processes of decomposition and disintegration have transformed it into a hair-raising monstrosity—and, of course, that’s what it looks like—the person assumes that the corpse has been transformed into a monster, either

by something else or by its own will. And, I'm sorry to say, in most if not all of the world's cultures, corpses escape from their graves ... even if they aren't aided by demons, they emerge from their graves here and there just through natural processes."

He swallowed a mouthful of beer before beginning again. "The most frequent cause, which also unearths large quantities of corpses, is floods. Imagine the state of society in that day, in which technology was rudimentary. If they had flood control infrastructure, it was only in the cities. It wasn't unusual for burial grounds to be flooded, and both bodies and coffins are buoyant. When the water receded, these grotesque things were exposed. Wind, rain, and sun obviously took their toll on the mounds of soil covering a grave. And, regardless of whether or not a coffin was used, most graveyards were the feeding grounds of sanitation animals, which would dig around in the earth. Aside from these 'natural disasters,' shall we say, there were also artificial reasons why corpses were unearthed. They might be dug up by grave robbers in search of burial accessories or a piece of the body to use for witchcraft. Or people who practiced multiple burial rites might dig them up in anticipation that they had become skeletons. Or they might be dug up for religious reasons, if someone wanted to expel the body of a heretic or a suicide from consecrated ground ..."

"We get it." Nabeta had already had enough.

"There's a lot more ..." Gotouda sounded disappointed as he reached for his box of Echos.

It was empty. "Got any cigarettes?" he asked Rei hopefully.

"I don't smoke outside of the house."

"Why the hell not?" Gotouda, who had been hoping for Long Peaces, voiced a sentiment inappropriate for a detective and proceeded to scan the rest of the group.

"I've got High Lights ..."

Gotouda lightly waved down Nabeta's offer and tried Doigaki. "Hey, you with the *bibimbap*. You smoke Short Hopes, if I'm not mistaken."

Doigaki tossed him the box of Short Hopes. Gotouda put a cigarette in his mouth, and, completely disregarding Doigaki's cold stare, put the box in his pocket before lighting his cigarette. "Now, where was I?"

"In preindustrial, illiterate societies, people had nothing to explain the mysteries of death but rotting corpses. And these corpses showed up frequently and looked like monsters to them. That's as far as you got." Shibano was displaying unprecedented patience. "In any case, that was a long time ago. I still don't see what this has to do with the direction of the investigation."

"Didn't I say it wasn't that long ago?" Gotouda said, and took another drag. "And also, we can't really say that modern man has completely succeeded in explaining death, can we? Human beings are the only animals that fear death and fear corpses, which symbolize death. A great man once said that because of our unique mentalities, we are unable to conceive of nonexistence."

"Who said that?" Amano demanded.

"I forget," Gotouda answered, "but as far as the psychological state of a human faced with a corpse, we modern men are not so different from the people who lived

in a world of ignorance and superstition. It is very rare for human beings to act in a way that's purely rational. Especially at the scene of a crime. Which brings me to my main point."

"Thank god! I was afraid we'd be here until the restaurant closed!"

Gotouda ignored Doigaki's sarcastic remark and continued. "Thus, human beings continually struggled with corpses that would emerge from their grave at every opportunity ... the important thing to note is the commonalities and differences between the general disposal of corpses—burial, that is—and hiding a corpse for the sake of concealing criminal evidence ..."

"In a regular burial, the primary issue is to prevent the body from metamorphosing or reappearing. In a criminal situation, however, the goal is to semi-permanently hide or destroy the body." Rei had more or less figured out where this was going, and he answered without hesitation.

"What happened to you? Did those *somen* noodles sharpen your wits or something?" Gotouda smiled with pleasure, wrinkling the corners of his eyes.

"Can we get to the point now?" Rei responded, his voice and expression ice cold.

"I listened to you guys go on and on; I wish you would return the favor. Anyway, let me speed things up. In normal circumstances, what are the considerations involved in deciding how to dispose of a body?"

All of their hands shot up.

"Convenience and cost."

"Disposing of the maximum number of bodies with minimal labor."

“Cleanliness.”

“Reliability.”

“Making sure it’s decent and won’t spawn social unrest.”

“Making sure it doesn’t stink.”

“Making sure people won’t see it.”

“Making sure you don’t have to do it yourself.”

“Let’s look at those in order of priority,” Gotouda said.

“One, act quickly, before the corpse starts to become active.

Two, make the corpse inactive as quickly as possible.

Three, as much as possible, avoid touching the corpse.

This same order applies in a criminal situation, but the first consideration is truly a matter of life and death and literally every second counts, the second is tied to impeding the investigation and concealing the murder, and the third is connected to destroying evidence. Got that?”

“Proceed.”

“Next, the objectives. Whether it’s a burial or a murder or what have you, there are all kinds of variations, but usually at least one of the following two things is done. One, containing the corpse in a specific place and preventing any anticipated hazards, such as someone wandering by and creating a fuss or exposing the crime. Two, making the corpse inactive. In either case, the corpse is ultimately in a state of equilibrium, i.e., the corpse is expected to reach the final stasis of its changes ... In other words, ideally it is reduced to bones or ashes, but, when it comes to everyday corpse disposal, cremation and mummification are both classified as serving the same function.” He slammed his fist into his palm for emphasis. “All right! Now let’s apply this knowledge! Say you’re a farmer, liv-

ing in the constant shadow of death, who has committed a murder and must dispose of the body. What do you do?"

"Bury it."

"Burn it."

"Weight it down and sink it."

"Dissolve it in acid."

"Immure it in concrete."

"Seal it up behind a wall."

"Feed it to the birds."

"Feed it to a crocodile."

"Feed it to a dog."

"Trick a person into eating it."

"Eat it yourself."

Having finished their *bibimbap* and *kuppa*, the boys hungrily piled a huge load of short ribs and roast onto the grill as they shouted out their answers.

"Apparently, it's easier for you to relate to a depraved farmer than to a virtuous one. That's fine. Let's look at each idea individually."

Gotouda lit up another of Doigaki's Short Hopes as he spoke.

"First, burial. By burying a body in the ground, you can anticipate that it will stay put, remain out of sight, and that the body itself will be eaten away by bacteria and worms. This simultaneously accomplishes both your objectives, and burial itself does not require specialized know-how, making this ostensibly the ideal solution. In fact, this is the most popular method of corpse disposal, both in ordinary circumstances and in murder cases. However, there are actually quite a number of conditions

that must be met; reducing your stiff to bones is harder than you would think. Generally, it is human nature to want to bury the body as far away as possible from one's home and community. Particularly in a murder, people fear various consequences, and they try to choose a location that's as remote as possible. You might characterize these locations as places not fit for habitation; specifically, popular choices include mountainous regions, ravines, and marshlands. But you should note that, as a rule of thumb, the qualities that make these regions uninhabitable also make them unsuited to the disposal of a body. Whether or not the body has begun to decompose, it's a heavy, cumbersome affair, and before cars were widespread, just transporting the thing required tremendous labor. Even if you went to the hassle of dragging the body into the mountains, the soil was thin and full of rocks, so burial was extremely difficult, and the microorganisms needed to break down the body were less prevalent. Japan's geographical features provide the necessary water, warmth, microorganisms, and insects needed for decomposition, but globally this was actually an exceptional case. Conversely, you might try a swamp or wetlands. The soil is plenty deep enough to bury a body, but the water level is high, making it nearly impossible to dig a deep hole without it filling with water. If you ignore this and try to bury the body anyway, the decomposition process will increase the buoyancy of the corpse, and, as I mentioned earlier, it will be easily exposed by heavy rain or flooding. In soils with a high pH, there's a danger of grave wax."

"What's grave wax?"

"The fatty tissues of the body chemically react with the sodium in the ground, causing a waxy substance to form ... in other words ..."

"Human soap," Nabeta said.

"Basically, it's extremely difficult to find a good, unpopulated spot where there are plenty of microorganisms and insects where you can dig deep enough to protect a body from predators. And, while it doesn't take a genius, grave digging is very labor intensive ... during a plague or a war, your capacity for disposal is quickly exhausted. Judging from these facts, burial is far from the ideal approach, whether you're putting a body to rest or trying to get rid of it. Also, for all of these reasons, the dead person has a tendency to pop back up, and in most murders and massacres the bodies end up being discovered ... If there are no questions I'll move on to the next item."

Nobody said anything.

"Cremation reduces the body to a completely inert, inorganic state—ashes. In this sense, it can be characterized as the ultimate method of body disposal. This is supported by the fact that in cultures that cremate their dead, phantoms don't have physical bodies; moreover, these cultures conduct cremation in part for the purpose of not creating phantoms. Some scholars even believe that the practice of cremation began as a preemptive strike against the undead, so this was an incredibly effective method. However, like burial, cremation has its drawbacks, too ... hey, isn't the burner on too high? The meat's burning!"

Shibano, who was managing the barbecue, hastily turned down the gas.

Nabeta and Doigaki must have had a premonition, because they hurriedly stuffed the half-burnt meat into their mouths. Amano instantly reloaded the emptied grill.

"The human body contains a lot of water, so it's very difficult to burn and it requires a great deal of energy to do so ... Let's look at an example of how the average adult would be cremated. According to certain documents, in order to completely reduce a 70-kilogram corpse to ashes, you need to maintain a temperature of 870° Celsius for forty-five to sixty minutes in an incinerator equipped with a high-temperature ventilation system. In an old-fashioned, high-fuel-consuming incinerator with no ventilation system, you would need about 700 kilograms of coke, or roughly 1500 cubic feet of gas. In an electric incinerator, you would need to burn 24 gallons of crude oil just to reach operation temperature, a lot more fuel than an oven heater in an elementary school uses in an entire day. Surprised?"

"I'm surprised," Amano admitted honestly.

"If you don't have one of these specialized incinerators, for example, if you're using a bonfire up in the mountains, like in a movie, documentation shows that it takes 21 cubic meters of wood and 91 days of labor to completely incinerate a body. In one case, 217 logs were used. In fact, this person also made use of flammable agents, such as gasoline, pitch, and animal fats like purified butter. But back then, people didn't have the unlimited access to gasoline that modern murderers do. Even if you do use gasoline, you still invest a great deal of time and care in the cremation process, otherwise you'll just end up with a charred body. The issue is not only that of getting the

fire hot enough, but of getting that heat to penetrate the corpse, and maintaining it until incineration is complete. A steady supply of oxygen is essential ... if you just lay the body on the ground, drench it in gasoline, and set it on fire, the parts of the body touching the ground won't burn. All you'll get is a creepy, medium-rare corpse that's half charbroiled and half raw."

The fat on the grill dripped, sending up a dramatic cloud of smoke.

Shibano diligently turned over each piece of meat.

"Essentially, a body is like short ribs. You have to position it at a suitable distance from the hot flames and turn it continually so that it cooks evenly. It's impossible to achieve without sufficient patience and resources. And, if it's a murdered body, your options as to where you can accomplish this kind of operation are probably limited to ceramics kilns, where the risk of being found out is quite high. And those aren't the only obstacles. If you consider human nature, and how a person would be affected by the involved task of cremating a body, the limitations are obvious. There's the expense, on top of the time required. Plus, it's disagreeable. Consequently, excluding criminals with exceptionally addled sensibilities, the only people who have historically been able to cremate corpses were those rich or powerful enough to be able to compel somebody else to do the dirty work. In fact, in ancient Rome, only the aristocrats were normally cremated. In India, the job was relegated to the untouchable caste, and the poor were left to float their dead down the Ganges river. Moreover, cremation, like burial, is completely un-

suited to the large-scale disposal of bodies necessary in a disaster situation because of the time and effort involved. During a plague, when manpower is at a premium, or on a battlefield, where survival is the highest priority, people just don't have the capacity to dig great numbers of graves or build extremely powerful fires. The enormous energy problem associated with cremation and the psychological aversion to handling bodies overwhelmed the capacity to dispose of bodies, and the result of this was ..."

"Mass graves," Rei mumbled.

"Dig a huge hole, throw bodies in over the edge, and toss in some lime or whatever on top. When the hole's full, cover it over with dirt. The Nazis used this method repeatedly at their concentration camps, and the Soviet Army used it during the Polish Katyn Forest Massacre.

"I might add that when Mozart died of a contagious disease, he was buried in the same way, in a mass grave. Whenever the human race experiences large quantities of deaths, pretty much the same technique is reinvented, and thus the dead come back to confront the killers or perpetrators of war crimes."

Irritated that nobody was helping themselves, Shibano began to distribute the meat.

Half out of contrariness, Rei shoved a piece of meat into his mouth, but the overdone roast had lost all of its juiciness and fat, and it tasted like a piece of paper dipped in barbecue sauce.

They chewed wordlessly.

"The human race's practice of eating meat has also called into question our humanity. There's the notion

that wars and murders are recompense for eating meat ...” Gotouda grinned.

“Who said that?” Rei asked.

“Definitely not the old guy who runs this place.”

“Why aren’t you eating?” Shibano sneered.

“I’m a vegetarian for ethical reasons. Didn’t I mention that?”

Shibano gave a disinterested snort and ate a mouthful of *namuru*.

“All right, try to listen as you eat. Next, sinking the corpse. There’s nothing quicker than throwing a body into a river or the ocean. Your contact with the corpse is minimal, and it’s highly economical. However, the process of decomposition is slower in the water than on land. Particularly if you take the easy road and throw the body in a river, you can’t rely on cleanup animals like fish and crustaceans to do their work, and, since a corpse is highly buoyant, there’s an extremely high risk of it showing up looking horrendous at some unforeseeable point downstream. In order to prevent this unwelcome encore performance—”

“Weight it down and sink it.”

“Give it concrete shoes.”

“Very good. However, in order to keep a body underwater, fundamentally, you need a weight that is sufficient to counteract its buoyancy. In other words, it has to be as heavy as the volume of water displaced by the corpse.”

“Yeah, we all know Archimedes’ Law, okay?” Rei said.

“Strictly speaking, if it was exactly as heavy, the corpse would drift around like a balloon, so it has to be heavier.”

“In actuality, when you add the buoyancy of the gas that is generated within the corpse ... bottom line, we’re

talking iron dumbbells. Ultimately, the extensive labor involved pretty much negates the advantages of this method. According to the records of Terrence Allen, former Deputy Coroner of the Los Angeles Medical Examiner's Bureau, one time a corpse surfaced that was tied to a cast-iron generator-case that weighed 165 pounds, or approximately 66 kilos, so we can safely say that it's almost impossible to keep a body underwater using your everyday weights. It can be directly understood that, from a criminal's point of view, lugging around objects that are even more conspicuous than a corpse, like huge boulders or hunks of steel, is putting the cart before the horse. The iron balls and chains you see in cheap gangster movies might be useful for intimidation purposes, but they aren't practically applicable. And you can forget about concrete shoes and the like."

"I guess cheap gangsters don't know Archimedes' Law," Nabeta said.

"The people who make cheap gangster movies don't," Gotouda corrected him.

"Okay, the next item is feeding the corpse to birds, wolves, hyenas, dogs, crocodiles, and other carnivorous animals; in other words, eliminating the meat on the body. Stated simply, this is disgusting. Being eaten by birds has sort of a romantic sound to it, but, according to the testimony of people who have actually witnessed the phenomenon, we're not just talking about the hustle and bustle of an outdoor barbecue stand—this is something genuinely savage. You want to make sure that all the meat gets devoured before it goes bad, so you chop the body up with an axe, strip the meat of the bones, and

hack it up into even smaller pieces ... it's such a dirty job that a caste is established to actually do it professionally, so that means you have to place an order and ultimately pay a fee. The mass production of scarred human bones leads to the probability that archaeologists and sociologists will mistake the practice for cannibalism. So, what about if you make use of wolves, hyenas, or crocodiles? First and foremost, these animals can't be found just anywhere, so it's not a method that can be used universally. Dogs are everywhere, but these are domestic animals, and there's an ethical issue involved with feeding them a human being, even a dead one. Moreover, there's the unpleasant phenomenon of dogs with human bones in their mouths roaming around outside your house. If you're a criminal, this equates to leaving evidence lying all over the place, so, unless you have a pet lion or a great white shark in your pool, you can forget it."

"Specter!"

"James Bond's world."

"Last, there's the idea of getting a person to eat the body. In almost every culture in the world there is a severe psychological aversion to the act of cannibalism that's more powerful than our desire to rid ourselves of dead bodies, so, as a means of regular corpse disposal, this doesn't even merit consideration. Even in criminal history, there are some instances of someone making part of a body into ham or sausage, or telling people it's liver and getting them to eat it, but there are no precedents for someone eating a whole body in order to destroy evidence. If you consider that the act of eating human flesh presents not

only emotional issues but philosophical ones, you can see for yourselves how formidable these are by the quantity of roast and short ribs we have left over here.”

In response to Gotouda’s provocation, Shibano swelled with defiance and obstinately piled a fresh load of meat onto the grill.

Again, a large cloud of smoke rose up, and everyone but Shibano looked disgusted.

“The remaining options are mummifying the body through chemical means, desiccating it with heat, sand, wind, or fire, or entombing it in a cave or other natural environment. However, while these methods do fix the body in stasis, they don’t accomplish the goal of destroying the body; if anything they preserve it, and thus closer examination eliminates them. Oh! Speaking of chemical methods, someone did suggest dissolving the body in acid ...”

Amano shuddered.

“Oh, it was you, wasn’t it. Well, horror movies aside, this necessitates acquiring mass amounts of chemicals, which tends to leave a trail. Moreover, the body doesn’t disappear, it just transforms into a goopy liquid. This nasty stuff would probably smell terrible and would be harder to handle than the corpse itself, so, as a disposal method, I think acid has virtually no merit ... I could go on and on, but you get the idea, right?”

Next to Rei, Nabeta let out a deep breath.

Amano and Doigaki also looked relieved.

“I think you all have a pretty good idea now of how cumbersome corpses are and how difficult it’s always been to dispose of them ... and of the human struggle

to deal with corpses and the difficulties that lie in store for murderers. Now, let's look at our murder case again from the perspective of corpse disposal. First, the killing you witnessed ..." Gotouda looked fixedly at Rei. "The girl who calls herself Saya and the two foreigners are clearly in cahoots. Of the pair, one of them ignored you, the witness, and set about retrieving the body. You said he used a large, rubber-coated bag, right?"

"I'm not sure exactly of the material. It was dark."

"It was most likely a specialized item like the ones the American Army is using in Vietnam to transport corpses. Not the kind of thing you can pick up just anywhere. From your description of how the girl examined the blade for nicks like a true killer, and of how one of the men acted like the leader, it's hard to imagine that this killing was related to a personal grudge. This was a professional job."

"Hit men?"

"Just because they're professionals doesn't mean they necessarily kill people for monetary remuneration. The Japanese sword and the high school girl's uniform seem absurdly out of place ... however, we have a skilled killer, a man who knows what he's doing when it comes to retrieving corpses, and a leader who has doubtlessly been around the block a few times. It stinks to high heaven of an illegal organization."

"It is the Mossad!" Amano said.

"Okay, now shut up!" Shibano said.

"The site wasn't the kind of place where you would normally commit a murder, but perhaps they were taking advantage of the confusion that night. They'd probably

done quite a bit of preparation. But, if we assume that these are professional assassins, the most salient point is that they retrieved the body. If it was a political assassination and they wanted to make a point to someone, the body would have been left, or even transported somewhere more visible. The act of retrieving a body engenders various risks, so they must have had a deliberate purpose or aim."

"A reason they wouldn't want people to see the body, hmm?" Nabeta muttered, and Rei involuntarily ducked his head.

He alone knew why nobody could see that body.

Perhaps this was his last chance to say it, but right now, the truth about the body wasn't the only thing that set Rei apart from the rest of the group.

Why hadn't Gotouda told the others that the blood that had been found on Rei's clothes hadn't been that of a human being? Gotouda's use of the word homicide seemed deliberate, and the man's inscrutable attitude made Rei hesitate.

"But if we assume that they're professional assassins, isn't there something oddly sloppy about their work?" Doigaki still seemed dubious. "According to Miwa, there was blood all over the place. If they collected the body to conceal the killing, wouldn't they have gone about the deed in a different way?"

"A Japanese sword ... that would definitely make the blood fly," Nabeta nodded. "If they're going to all the trouble to remove the body, I guess it would defeat the purpose to leave blood everywhere, wouldn't it."

"A gun, now that's professional," Amano contributed happily. "With a silencer on it—*pyu-pyu!*"

"I don't know why they chose an anachronism like a Japanese sword. As for how they dealt with the crime scene, that's not too difficult to explain. He mentioned the possibility that they were taking advantage of the circumstances that night ... if it were me, I would have used firebombs. You couldn't incinerate the body, but you could easily erase the blood on the walls and ground. There were actually little fires here and there that night."

"Oh, right!" Amano was easily convinced.

"Yeah, but what about their reason for letting Miwa live? How come they didn't wipe him out then and there?" Nabeta responded somewhat self-mockingly to Doigaki's persistence.

"Why would the cops believe a teenaged extremist? There was no evidence or anything."

"Miwa, you had a helmet on that night, right?" Shibano questioned Rei sharply.

"Yeah, didn't you?" Doigaki chimed in.

Rei had been keeping quiet, watching for the direction the conversation was going. When the questions were suddenly focused in his direction, he grew flustered. Depending on how he answered, the vague parts of his testimony might be drawn out of him, and he would be forced to confess the reality he had concealed even from Gotouda.

Surprisingly enough, it was Gotouda who came to his rescue.

"No matter who they're up against, professionals avoid unnecessary killings because they ultimately result in taking on extra risks. It's even a kind of taboo to involve a

disinterested, unrelated party ... But that was a pretty astute point. Now, we're getting somewhere!"

"Huh," Doigaki snorted, dissatisfied. "I wasn't asking for your praise."

"But there were definitely many unnatural things about their behavior. Just like the kid with the *bibimbap* said, it's hard to imagine that they were trying to hide their criminal activities. Their motivation in retrieving the body is still an enigma, but even just knowing that is a step in the right direction."

They didn't seem completely convinced, but at least Doigaki and Shibano had stopped interrogating Rei.

Still, Rei's suspicion of Gotouda continued to deepen.

Despite Gotouda's vexingly logical way of speaking, his style of argument was too overbearing. And the weird flattery he bestowed upon Doigaki was unnatural in light of his consistently derisive attitude.

And Rei couldn't shake the feeling that, even as Gotouda led them toward the essence of the case, when certain issues came up, he would steer the conversation in another direction.

Perhaps Gotouda knew what Rei had seen that night. The moment the thought occurred to Rei, he was astonished by it.

Gotouda couldn't know.

There wasn't one chance in ten thousand that Gotouda had seen it.

Even as he struggled to deny it, a sudden, insurmountable doubt swelled up inside him.

If Gotouda had already known when he had visited Rei's room, why hadn't he said anything about it? No.

If he had known, and he had still enlisted Rei's help, it was impossible to believe that Gotouda was really just a detective who was stubbornly continuing his investigation.

Who on earth was he?

Once again, Rei pondered the doglike middle-aged man in front of him.

"Next, the three consecutive killings. Aside from the all-too-distinctive blood drain, these cases are overflowing with elements that are worthy of analysis in the corpse-disposal department. The locations have nothing in common—the second floor of the kid's home, a nearby abandoned building, and under a bridge on the Tamagawa River—but the fact that the bodies were abandoned is common to all three cases."

"If they dared leave the bodies ..."

"In the second incident, the body was found on the second floor of the guy's home. One of the most difficult places to commit a crime, and, if you consider the risks involved, it's hard to imagine that it wasn't done deliberately."

"Maybe the corpse was left because it was that kind of place."

"Then what about the third case, in which the body was found under a bridge? We're talking about a place with all kinds of human traffic, from joggers to dog walkers. In all three cases, the victim's clothing was completely intact, and there was no sign of a struggle. I wouldn't say the writing's on the wall, but it's possible that someone left it there on purpose to make sure it was found."

"Why? To what end?"

"A warning?"

"To whom? Regarding what?"

"Maybe as a kind of challenge."

"Yeah, but to whom, and regarding what!" Shibano was beginning to shout again.

Gotouda intervened in placating tones. "It doesn't matter if we still don't know what their intention was at this stage. The important thing is that the manner in which they dealt with the body seems intended to ensure its discovery. We can infer that from the three locations in which the bodies were found."

"An abandoned building, a home, and beneath a bridge on a footpath ... the only place that would be more obvious would be the doorstep of a police station."

"I know! It's a challenge to the police!"

"Then why would they target antiestablishment political activists? Haven't I told you not to shout out your half-formed ideas!"

"If the murders themselves and the way the corpses were dealt with were different, maybe Miwa is right about there being two different perpetrators with differing motives ..." Nabeta concluded.

Gotouda spoke up. "There may be two perpetrators, but there are three motives."

They all looked at him, including Rei, who had been keeping silent.

Rei's mouth dropped open in surprise. "The motive for removing the body in order to hide it, and the motive for leaving the bodies to be discovered. What else is there?"

"The motive for removing the bodies in order to conceal the incidents themselves ... the fact that these bodies

still haven't turned up is the greatest evidence of this," Gotouda answered enigmatically.

"What do you mean, the bodies still haven't turned up?"

"Are there *more* killings involved?"

Rei, who had been thinking quietly, was astounded by the possibility that finally occurred to him. "You don't mean ..."

"There were seven SR Faction members that we listed up as victims or potential victims. Three of them have turned up dead, and one continues to boldly attend high school. What happened to the other three?"

"But didn't they disappear even before the three murders?"

"Listen, *we're* not an illiterate society. Just because something disappears doesn't mean it ceases to exist."

The rest of the group followed Rei and Gotouda's exchange with baited breath.

Gotouda drained the rest of his beer and continued. "I have no concrete proof, but I'd bet tonight's dinner on it ... they've already been done in. I'm positive."

"Hold it right there!" Shibano objected. "We don't have a red cent, so don't go pulling anything ..."

"Let's leave the vulgar stuff for later. What's your basis for saying that the other three have been killed?" Rei interrupted Shibano and leaned in toward Gotouda.

"It's a simple matter of sequence," Gotouda responded as if this should be obvious. "After leaving three freaky bodies lying around, there'd be no point in going to the trouble to hide the rest. If we assume that the serial killer is rational—and we have to, considering his technique in pulling off so many incidents without a single witness and the way the three stiffs line up—it's unthinkable that

the way he dealt with the corpses was random. If you intend to pull off a series of crimes, you do your best to conceal the bodies to whatever extent possible in order to avoid the handicap of the incidents being discovered and the judicial investigation being put into motion. This goes double if the victims are limited to such a tiny sphere. Thus, it's possible for a criminal who has succeeded in concealing bodies to change his mind for some reason and decide to abandon the bodies to be discovered, but the reverse would never happen. Am I wrong?"

"This is all just speculation."

"Well, I told you I didn't have any concrete proof."

"Is that what you call detective's intuition?"

"You can if you want to. Intuition, after all, is nothing more than the conclusion of inductive thinking via the application of one's experience as a substitute for evidence in a given process. It's nothing to scoff at ... besides, we don't have time. We can't always wait around for seamless evidence."

"We don't have time? What do you—" Amano started to ask.

"I mean that there's no buffer left on the victim list. If six out of the seven have been erased, that leaves only one ... your buddy, Shouji Aoki."

"Let's go over the facts," Shibano declared. "Say we decide to grudgingly accept the Old Fogey's statement that the three guys who disappeared have already been killed, and, due to some change in circumstances, the following three victims' bodies were abandoned—"

"It's true," Gotouda said.

"It's highly likely that the change in circumstances had to do with the appearance of Saya and the foreign duo. By the course of events, it seems improbable that the two suspicious parties are unrelated. I don't know what the beef is between them, but the fact that the embassy secretly has an oar in the water suggests the possibility of an international plot on the part of that state or a state-related organization."

"It is the Mossad!" Amano said.

"We still don't have sufficient information, but unfortunately, just as the old guy says, the situation is urgent ..."

Too occupied to shout Amano down, Shibano continued.

"I propose that the entire group speaks with Shouji Aoki and conducts a full inquiry ... and that we do it tonight." His gaze was steady.

"Hey, no ambushing the guy." Gotouda paid lip service to the fact that he was a cop and older than they were, but it was clear from his eyes that he found Shibano's idea appealing. "If you want, I could sit in."

"No outsiders. Besides, if you were there, Aoki wouldn't say a word."

"I wonder if he'll agree to meet us," Nabeta said.

"Even if he does, we don't know if he'll talk ... even under the circumstances, the dumbass persists in coming to school!" Doigaki put in.

"We'll make him talk. This is no time to be pulling our punches."

"But an inquiry? Where'll we hold it?" Alarmed by the threat of confrontation, Amano spoke timidly.

"Not in the restaurant, anyway."

"Yeah, we can count on Shibano to yell."

"But at this hour, we can't use the clubroom."

"No, not the clubroom. Aoki's being targeted. In a surprise attack, there'd be no escape."

"We could go on a drive ... borrow Amano's family's van. If we go to a park in the Yokohama area we should be safe; there're bound to be plenty of necking couples around."

Amano was the eldest son of a general contractor. On several occasions, he had borrowed the company vehicle and gone on excursions to parks in Yokohama in the middle of the night with Rei or Nabeta. Of course, none of them had a driver's license.

"Overruled. What if one of those couples called the police on us?"

"We'd probably look like a pack of voyeurs."

"Let's go to my house. My old man's away for a trial and there's nobody there. We won't cause enough ruckus to provoke anyone to come barging into a private home. If a neighbor complains, we can say we were just having a party."

"What about your little brother?"

"Give him some spending money and tell him to go stay at a friend's house. What do you think?"

"As long as there's no violence involved, I have no objections."

After Rei's caveat, the rest agreed to the plan.

"I'll contact Aoki. We'll meet tonight at ten."

"What if you can't reach him?"

"Then we'll have a party for real. Fortunately, we've got plenty of barbecue." With a flourish, he pulled a plastic

bag out of his backpack and, rolling his eyes at their gloomy expressions, began to fill it with meat.

"Take the leftovers home if you want, but eat what you've grilled, now," Gotouda said, kicking them while they were down. "This place may be cheap, but I'm paying for it out of my meager salary."

"Oh, we'll eat it!" Shibano blustered, and, at his urging, Rei and the others reached out their chopsticks for the half-burnt meat.

"By the way, where do you suppose the missing three bodies disappeared to?" Amano voiced the question they had been avoiding, and Gotouda answered.

"God only knows. Maybe they were eaten. *Heh-heh-heh!*" His hyena-like laugh reverberated throughout the room.

It was several hours later that they learned of Shouji Aoki's disappearance.

Aoki had never returned home after leaving school that afternoon. Shibano found out when he called Aoki's house and Aoki's mother began to question him about her son's whereabouts.

In the end, the group went to Shibano's house and drank large amounts of cheap alcohol and ate huge quantities of meat ... they got sick, and, by morning, everyone one of them had puked it all up.

— ALLIANCE —

ONE

Rei heard about Amano and Doigaki's arrest the day after the group had failed to question Aoki and had instead gotten sick on booze and barbecue at Shibano's house. More specifically, it was almost evening when he found out, after returning home that morning and letting himself in with his secret key, crawling into bed, and passing out for about twelve hours.

Nabeta had called, pretending to be a classmate, but he hadn't had much information. For the time being, Nabeta had suggested an emergency meeting to discuss the situation, and Rei had thrown on a jacket and raced out of the house.

In the front entryway, his mother had stood in his way, burning with the noble cause of diverting her son from going down the wrong road. But Rei had smashed through her roadblock—when she'd grabbed him by the jacket, he'd simply shed the thing and left it with her, sprinting toward the train station at top speed.

It was evening when he arrived at the mammoth coffee shop where they were to meet, and the place was swarming with people. It was decorated in a dubious

Roman theme, with such blatant nouveau-riche touches as suits of armor on the landings and balconies sticking out every which way, despite the fact that it was located in a neighborhood with a high concentration of *pachinko* parlors and its clientele was seedy.

Gangsters making their rounds, hostesses, shopkeepers, and middle-aged real estate brokers ... Rei navigated the restaurant floor through the carousing sea of unsavory characters. Ascending a mazelike staircase, he finally spotted Nabeta on who-knows-what floor. He raised his hand in greeting as he approached.

Nabeta, apparently completely recovered from his hangover, was eating a garishly ornate ice-cream sundae. As he sat down, Rei realized he hadn't eaten anything all day. He ordered a toast and tea.

"What's the story?" Rei leaned in and asked in a low voice, after the heavily made-up waitress had left.

"There's not much to tell. I got a call from that Gotouda character about two hours ago—he said he'd heard that Doigaki and Amano had been nabbed. He was going to look into it and then meet up with us to fill us in."

"What about Shibano?"

"He's going a mile a minute. If they've really been pinched, we'll have our work cut out for us. He's contacting the support center and so on ... we're worried about Aoki, too."

"Any news?"

"Shibano called his house again in the afternoon, but Aoki's still missing. Shibano said his mom sounded half crazed."

"Shit."

"You said it."

The two of them fell silent.

There was a mountain of things they needed to talk about, but, under such grave circumstances, neither of them could muster the energy to speak. For now, they could only wait for Gotouda and Shibano to show up and clarify the situation.

The toast arrived first.

It gave off a buttery aroma as Rei cut it in half, applied a thick layer of jam, and sunk his teeth into it. He added plenty of milk to his tea and sipped it in between bites.

Rei had just begun to spread jam on the other half of his slice when Shibano appeared, wearing a dour expression. He took one look at Rei's toast and ordered a ham and toast, but, after a moment's thought, changed his order to an egg sandwich.

"How'd it go?" Nabeta inquired as he spooned up his parfait.

"Not much to report ... at this point, the support people haven't heard anything. Just in case, I disposed of all the documents in the clubroom."

"What about Aoki?"

"I stopped by his house on the way here, but he hadn't come home. I don't have the faintest clue whether he was arrested, snuffed, or if he decided to preemptively go into hiding. It was terrible, his mother clinging to me and crying and stuff." At this, Shibano fell silent, crossing his arms.

Just as Rei finished off his toast, Shibano's egg sandwich arrived, which inspired Nabeta to order pancakes. Shibano gazed off into space as he put away the egg sandwich and

sipped his coffee. Gotouda finally arrived just as Nabeta was anointing his pancakes with syrup.

Gotouda wrinkled his nose at the havoc on the table and ordered a beer immediately upon taking his seat. He waited for the waitress to clear away the empty dishes before beginning to speak.

"They were riding double on a motor scooter, waiting at a stoplight in Asabu. A cop on the beat started questioning them and found them suspicious. They agreed to accompany him voluntarily to a nearby police box. There, upon further questioning, they suddenly became violent and punched one of the officers working there. They were arrested on the spot for assault and battery, and obstruction of a police officer in the line of duty. The boys were identified by the train passes they were carrying as one Yuichi Doigaki and Masaru Amano, third-year students at Tokyo K High School. They're currently being held in a detention cell at the Asabu station ..."

"They did get nabbed!"

"Neither of them is stupid enough to punch a cop in a police box. It's a lie!"

"Of course it is," Gotouda acknowledged the fact evenly. "The story's fishy from the part about the questioning. If they'd refused to go in for voluntary questioning they'd have used an obstruction charge, and once they're inside the police box, anything goes. They were targeted, all right."

In the first place, interpreted literally, police questioning itself wasn't legally obligatory, and a person should have had the right to refuse to accompany an officer to be questioned. But, in actuality, unless a person was with a

large number of friends, or there were many witnesses present, refusing to go with an officer was very difficult to do. If a person persisted in resisting, there was a good chance the person would be labeled as interfering with an officer in the line of duty. Moreover, the deep recesses of a police box were literally a legal no-man's-land: secret chambers removed from the eyes of passersby. The cops could rough a detainee up as much as they liked, and the only witnesses would be the other officers present. It would be almost impossible to prove retrospectively, as the officers could always claim that the detainee got banged up during a struggle, or fell down or something of the kind. The police also had specialized techniques so as not to leave marks, including beating their victims with a phone book.

Detention cells, which were also sheltered from public view, were a world in which the police had almost complete discretion over a person's fate; they were hotbeds of coerced confessions and false charges.

"I bet they had a car waiting to chase them down if they fled. Way to take on the big, scary high school kids." Gotouda's voice dripped with self-derision.

"But why? Like you said, we're just high school—" The waitress appeared with Gotouda's beer, and Nabeta bit his tongue.

Gotouda munched the soybeans that had been brought as a side and poured the beer into his glass. "The beat-pounders were just blindly obeying orders from above. If someone wants to put the breaks on our investigation, that's easy enough to do ... but if they were willing to apply such

blatant measures on a couple of teenagers, the situation might be more serious than we anticipated.”

“Is this related to Aoki’s disappearance?” Rei asked.

“It’s hard to tell the chicken from the egg,” Gotouda answered cryptically, sipping his beer.

“Now our cover’s blown. That can’t be good,” Nabeta said despondently as he cut up his now half-cold pancakes.

“Our cover? The fact that Doigaki and Nabeta were targeted means that they were already onto us. Right about now, I bet their parents have gotten a call from the police and are freaking out. We’ll be hearing about this.”

Nabeta had to agree with Rei’s analysis, and his face grew even gloomier as he stuffed it with pancake.

Rei didn’t know if it was a plight common to all high school activists, but in his group, the parents had constructed a powerful telephone network. Where they were meeting and with whom, who was up to what and where ... motivated by parental concern, the level of accuracy of their information was alarming. Once, a guidance counselor had called Rei into his office and slammed a handbill down on his desk, shouting, “You wrote this, Shibano printed it, and Nabeta distributed it!” They knew things that only those closest to Rei’s group could possibly have known. When the boys looked into the matter further, they learned that the information leak came from Rei’s discarded manuscripts in the wastepaper bin in Shibano’s bedroom. Since then, they had been forced to exercise revolutionary caution even when it came to the garbage cans in their rooms.

Even now, the secret information network was up and running full force, and it was as clear as day that intricate

conferencing and intrigue took place via telephone between their households.

The frightening part was the absolutist ideology of the parental mentality, and it was likely that the disappearance of one member and the arrest of two others would occasion a full-fledged showdown with what the boys called familial imperialism.

"I wonder what the hell those dumbshits were doing in Asabu, anyway," Nabeta muttered.

Rei responded indifferently. "They were probably following the car. Riding double and without a license."

"They always were adventuresome."

"I doubt they'll get out anytime soon." Gotouda sounded disgruntled. "I told them not to do it—"

"You're supposed to be a detective, aren't you? Quit bitching and moaning and do something to get them out!" Shibano, who had been silent up until that point, suddenly exploded.

The shady customers of the surrounding tables all looked up, and the young men giving off clouds of smoke at the next table rose halfway to their feet at the mention of the word detective. By the looks of them, the young delinquents were orthodox Marxists, one division away from the reformist faction to which Rei's group belonged. The entire room froze with tension, and a waitress holding a stainless steel platter let it fall clattering to the floor.

Gotouda rose to his feet and delivered a line like the emcee at a wedding reception: "Please excuse the interruption. And now I hope you'll relax and proceed with your conversations." He sat back down.

The room filled with whispers, and then the talking and laughing resumed. The hoodlums at the next table quietly stood up and left, and the original ambience was restored.

"What are you yelling for, dumbass!" Rei leaned forward and berated Shibano.

Shibano's face was as angry as ever, but at least he lowered his voice when he spoke again. "Get them released!"

"Don't be unreasonable. Just as you guys are mere high school students, I'm only a lowly police sergeant. It was hard enough just to get the information I've given you."

"Do something!" Shibano persisted.

Rei ignored him and addressed Gotouda. "What'll happen to them?"

"I don't know the intentions of the higher-ups, so I can't say for sure, but there's no case there. If they're just trying to intimidate us, it's not worth the time and trouble of a court battle. It makes more sense just to hold them for as long as they legally can and then release them ..." He poured the rest of the beer into his glass. "Besides, I don't think this is really about warning us or restraining our activities."

"What do you mean?"

"The police are a large group, and at each level people have different ideas ... you can't assume that all the ranks agree with each other." He was uncharacteristically inarticulate. "Anyway, what about the girl?"

"Nothing to report. She was at school today, looking as indifferent as ever."

"And Shouji Aoki?"

"Since yesterday he hasn't gone home, hasn't shown up at school, and nobody's heard from him," Nabeta answered.

"There's been no report of a body. Don't worry, he's still alive."

"Detective's intuition again?"

"Anyway, don't worry about those two. The situation won't improve, but it won't get worse, either. The two of you should lay low for a little while, too."

He told them he'd contact them later. When he stood to go, Nabeta promptly handed him the bill. Gotouda glanced at it and cursed under his breath but took it with him as he stalked off.

"What should we do now?" Nabeta asked Rei uneasily.

"Dunno ... I don't want to go home, though."

"I don't either," Nabeta agreed.

"Neither do I!" Shibano said.

When they got home, each would have to confront a bloody massacre.

Nabeta's household was the hub of the parental information network. His father and brother were public employees who worked at the ward office, and even his mother was the district chair of the Conservative Party Women's League.

Shibano had his own problems. His parents thought he was the leader of the group. This was a complete misunderstanding; in reality, he simply took on various tasks that were well-suited to his methodical nature. Moreover, Shibano's motorcycle-crazy younger brother was being held back a grade in school due to truancy, and the household was already in a constant uproar for that reason.

Then there was Rei, who had been running around doing who-knows-what despite the fact that he was under school suspension, and who, that morning, had busted through his mother's roadblock.

The thought of their parents lying in wait for them made them depressed, and they slumped in their chairs. If it meant avoiding their parents, they would have been happy to join Amano and Doigaki in jail.

The three of them pooled their money and each had one more cup of coffee. They filled the ashtray with cigarette butts, and, when they were finally kicked out of the coffee shop, they wandered the streets killing time, knowing full well they were only making things worse. Then, eventually, each of them went home.

TWO

Rei was once more put under house arrest. Before, he had stayed housebound of his own will, but this time it was obligatory, and he was confined in the true sense of the word.

That night, after he parted company with Shibano and Nabeta, Rei was confronted by two slightly different demons: his father, turned hellhound by alcohol, and his mother, determined to play the ogre for her son's own good.

Teacups and teapots flew through the air, as did shouts of such archaic rebukes as *Derelict! Enemy of the state! Turncoat!* and *Ne'er-do-well!* Paper screens were ripped, the dog next door joined in loudly, and, in response to the uproar, Rei chose the effective tactic of remaining completely silent. This enraged his father still further, and when he came at Rei, fists raised, Rei's mother threw herself in the way to protect her son and took the punch. She flew across the room and landed unconscious on the floor, and Rei's panicked call for an ambulance finally brought an end to the mayhem.

Of course, it wasn't really over yet.

Rei had optimistically hoped that the issue would now be dropped, but the next day, his mother insisted on being released from the hospital, and when she got home she grounded Rei for the remainder of his suspension from school.

He was forbidden to leave the house, make phone calls, answer the phone, send or receive mail, etc., etc. He was not to leave his room except to use the toilet, and even his meals were to be taken on a tray in his room. Moreover, suspicious of Rei's nighttime activities, his mother called a locksmith and had the lock changed on the front door, rendering his secret spare key sadly obsolete.

As before, Rei passed the time sleeping during his first three days under house arrest.

Although he was officially imprisoned, he wasn't a child, and escape wouldn't have been impossible. The door of his room wasn't locked, and, during the day, the front door had to be left open to accommodate the employees in the rented offices. Still, Rei submitted to the situation for two reasons.

Were he to ignore his mother's prohibitions and leave the house, an even more intense domestic conflict was bound to ensue, and his truly barbarian father could be counted on to play the part. As much as possible, Rei preferred to avoid being hit by his father. He also preferred avoiding the possibility of hitting back and getting in a brawl with the man. If it was to come to such unpleasantness, Rei would rather choose the last resort of the revolt against the domestic imperialists: he would leave home. Conventional wisdom would label this as a weakness or limitation, but Rei had his own logic that enabled him to justify it.

Rei didn't know whether or not Lenin, who had espoused armed revolution, had beaten his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, but he felt that there was a difference between political violence and violence on a personal level that resulted

from emotional instability. He often compared this to the difference between revolutionary wars and imperialist wars of aggression.

In fact, it was absurd to equate Lenin the revolutionary with Lenin the biological organism. The feelings one possessed in the unique world that comprised one's family and relatives were clearly based on different psychological processes from one's social and political motives. Confusing the two was an enormous mistake, but, like most high school activists of the time, Rei was exceedingly moral and hasty in the severity of his ideology. Thus, while he had resolved not to balk at disturbing the peace of civil society with the use of Molotov cocktails and bombs if need be, he was a young man who could not bear familial strife (although he would never have admitted it). He was unable to confront the fact that he was hurt by his violent and overbearing father; instead, he struggled to whitewash reality with ideology. Of course, Rei himself was unaware of this.

The other reason, and the more decisive and direct one, was the fact that he had no idea what to do.

Unable to contact either Shibano nor Nabeta, he had no idea what they were up to, but no doubt their circumstances were similar to his.

Rei lay face up on his bed, pondering the case as he stared at the ceiling. For three days, this was all he had done when he wasn't sleeping, eating, or using the bathroom.

It wasn't as if he had anything else to do.

There was a killer with an unclear motive, slaughtering the high school members of a minor partisan faction in such an unfathomable way ... and there was the girl

called Saya and the two foreigners who were monitoring the victims for yet another reason.

Rei already had an image of another issue that stood between the two motives and involved parties, based on a secret that he alone knew. *No*, he thought, *Gotouda might know a part of it, too.*

Objectively speaking, it wouldn't be surprising for Aoki's dead body to surface at any moment. If that happened, there would be no reason for Saya to remain at Rei's high school. Even if the case itself wasn't solved, Aoki was their only link to it, and, once he was gone, it would become divorced from Rei, Shibano, and the others, and their connection to Saya and Gotouda would cease to exist. Doigaki and Amano would be released from custody, and, so long as Rei kept his mouth shut about his secret, everything would go back to how it was before—except for the loss of their friend, Aoki.

Of course, Rei didn't want this to happen, but the reality was that he could not imagine any other potential resolution.

After all, Rei, Shibano, and the others were still just teenagers living with their parents. This fact had been unpleasantly emphasized since the recent shift in the situation. While Saya appeared to be a high school girl, it was obvious that she was the denizen of a world beyond their imaginations, with the mysterious foreign duo at her side like shadows and the hint of an enormous organization looming behind her. Rei and his friends were out of her league. And even this fact had been demonstrated through Gotouda's investigation; Rei's friends had only rounded up the evidence to provide a small amount of re-

inforcement and conviction to what Gotouda already knew. While it was true that he wanted to save Aoki, Rei had become despondent and intimidated as a result of Aoki's disappearance and the arrest of two of his friends through some unknown machinations. Now, here he was, in a laughable state of home arrest, annihilated by domestic conflict.

Rei wondered vaguely what Saya was doing.

Now that he thought about it, after that night Rei had never once seen her again. For some reason, this seemed strange to him, although of course he had never forgotten her animal gaze and white skin, or the terror of the moment when she had been ready to slice him to pieces.

Rei would only be under suspension for a few more days. If the situation changed decisively before then, he might never see her again in his entire life. Rei sat up suddenly in bed.

Did he want to see Saya again?

Rei was startled that he would even think such a thing.

He remembered when he had compared her to a wolf in the woods. Of course, you would never forget it if you ran across a wolf in a dark forest. But what was it that you couldn't forget? The terror of meeting a wolf, or the wolf itself?

Rei got up from his bed and stood in front of the sink. He filled his small aluminum kettle with water and put it on the gas stove.

Four hours had passed since his mother had brought him a large serving of curry and rice for lunch, and Rei was starving. He opened the cabinet over the sink, took a packet of instant ramen from his secret stash, and ripped it open. He broke the noodles in half and stuffed them in

the kettle. He also ripped open the little packets of instant soup and chili oil that were included. All he had to do was adjust the burner so that the water wouldn't boil over through the spout.

Ramen in a kettle wasn't pretty, but it was easy. Besides, the heat circulated well inside the pot, giving the noodles a unique smoothness, and the only dish to wash was the kettle. Rei cooked this way at least every other day.

He grabbed the brown, well-used, disposable chopsticks from his pen stand and was sitting cross-legged in his chair, waiting for the water to boil, when a knock at the door made him flinch.

Just to be safe, he turned off the burner before opening the door. His disgruntled mother stood in the hall.

"You had a phone call from the bookstore ... you can go pick up the book after your suspension is over, got that?"

Rei gave a noncommittal grunt and his mother handed him the message. She looked as if she had more to say, and she gave him what Rei thought was a suspicious look before turning her back on her son and leaving the room.

When Rei closed the door and read the note, the blood drained from his face.

*Hyoudou Bookstore in front of Ochanomizu Station
Akira Kamiu The Loner, ¥1700, is now in stock
Only a few copies, might sell out today.*

It was a message from Aoki.

Hyoudou was Aoki's organizational alias, the name he used in their minutes and communications, as a pen

name in the manuscripts he drafted, and in his personal journal. Such names were in everyday usage by activists as a defensive measure in case their documents fell into the hands of the authorities. Rei and the others couldn't be bothered, but recently Aoki had advocated the use of aliases and had stubbornly begun using one himself. Kamiu was Rei's alias, Ochanomizu Station was the meeting place, and 1700 was the time. The title *The Loner* probably meant that Rei was to come alone. The part about only a few copies was crossed out, probably his mother's work, but it implied a sense of urgency and the need to hurry.

Put it all together and the message read:

Rei Miwa,

*Meet me in front of Ochanomizu Station at five p.m.
today. Come alone. Urgent.*

Shouji Aoki

The sudden turn of events left Rei reeling.

He had not expected to be directly contacted by Aoki himself, but, under the circumstances, it was not entirely inexplicable. Aoki had sneered at Rei and the others and obstinately continued to go to school, but if he had sensed danger and decided to go into hiding, it was only natural that he would contact his friends. It also figured that he would choose Rei, with whom he had gotten along well, rather than Shibano or any of the others. In the interest of minimizing the risk of being seen, it made sense that he told Rei to come alone. If the danger was great enough to warrant going into hiding, the matter

was certainly urgent, and, at the very worst, this might be the last chance Rei had to hear what Aoki had to say.

No. Rei wracked his mind, going over all of the possibilities, and forgot to turn the burner back on under the kettle.

Could he really be sure that this message was from Aoki? It was also possible that whoever had used the police to lock up Doigaki and Amano was now attempting to contain Rei, but it was hard to imagine anyone would go to the trouble while he was imprisoned in his own home. The only people who knew Rei's alias, Kamiu, were Aoki and the other members of the group, unless someone had leaked it. So, maybe the message was legitimate. If it was, Aoki wanted to tell him something ...

Rei wanted to talk to someone, but he couldn't contact Shibano or Nabeta directly, and he was almost out of time.

Gotouda's deceptively dopey-looking face popped into Rei's head, but he had decided already that he would wait for Gotouda to contact him, since he couldn't very well call him up at the police station.

If only he had a cigarette. But he had already smoked his last one after lunch.

According to the clock on his desk, even if he left right now, he would barely make it to Ochanomizu at the designated hour.

If he answered Aoki's summons and left the house, Rei or his father might end up in an ambulance. But at this point, that didn't matter.

Rei snatched up all the cash he had and stuffed it in his pockets. He carried his shoes in his hands so as not to make a sound as he sped down the stairs.

THREE

As always, Ochanomizu Station was swarming with people.

The neighborhood was familiar. There were a lot of second-hand bookstores in this area, including some that specialized in ideological manuscripts and publications of the New Left, and Rei came here at least once a week with Nabeta, Aoki, or the others.

He bought a pack of Long Peaces at a kiosk in the station and headed straight for the big standing ashtray beyond the ticket machines. If Aoki was going to show up, he would come here.

Aoki was nowhere to be seen, but, glancing at his watch, Rei saw that he was a few minutes early.

He tore open the fresh pack of Long Peaces, pulled one out, and put it in his mouth. Rei had a strange aversion to smoking in public and rarely did so, but that didn't apply in this neighborhood. There were a lot of universities concentrated in Ochanomizu and at the present time almost all of them were staging struggles. There were even a few in which students had maintained a barricade for more than half a year. As a result, the students around here had a certain vibe, and if you threw a rock you would probably hit an

activist or a sympathizer. It was the mecca of student revolutionaries.

Across the intersection stood a bleak-looking police box that had already been torched several times in the past year and had been fire bombed during the unified movement the other day. Rei was smoking his cigarette and gazing absently at the sooty building when he suddenly felt a tap on his back. Reflexively, he started to turn around.

"Don't look," a low voice said sharply.

It was Aoki's voice.

"Walk forward. Go past the police box and go down the sidewalk on the left side of the street. Do exactly as I say, Miwa."

Rei hesitated, but something about the urgency in Aoki's voice made him throw away his cigarette and obey the command.

He left the station and headed toward the Jinbouchou area down a gently sloping street. After about a hundred meters, the restaurants and bookstores ended and he came to a wall that surrounded the M University Law School building. All along the wall, there were placards inscribed with an academic-looking, ceremonious script. Rei walked slowly past them.

Where the hell was he going? Was Aoki really behind him? His anxiety made him want to stop, but just then Aoki muttered, "Go left at the next corner," as if he had sensed Rei's hesitation.

Rei turned left. Now the pavement veered uphill and there were far fewer people around. Then the slope became less steep, and Rei felt a strange, oppressive atmosphere emanating from Aoki's presence behind him.

As they approached the front entrance of what appeared to be an annex, Aoki suddenly darted forward, grabbed Rei's elbow, and pulled him into the building.

He tried to continue to drag Rei along, but Rei shook free of his grip. "Where the hell are you taking me?"

Rei was displeased with the drama of the proceedings, and the question came out more like an accusation.

"The leader of my organization's committee wants to ask you some questions. I want you to meet with him."

"Just a minute!" Now Rei was flustered. Rei was the one who wanted to ask Aoki some questions. He had no intention of meeting with the leader of a political party, especially not the undesirable type that might lead a party of such ill repute as the SR Faction.

"I'm just asking you to speak with him. He just wants to know what you guys found out ... this isn't an inquisition or anything."

The word inquisition brought a stab of fear, and Rei completely forgot that just the other day he and the others had resolved to stage one on Aoki.

"No way. I'm hear to talk about your ..."

"Listen!" Aoki interrupted him sharply. "Six members of my group have already been killed! This isn't just my personal problem. Almost the entire High School Committee is completely wiped out!"

"That's your sect's problem."

Aoki's expression changed. "Do you really mean that? On the streets, you're happy to trail around after any sect that'll take you. You call yourselves nonpartisan, and now you're the one being sectarian!"

"Take that back!"

Rei's anger mounted, and he raised his voice without meaning to. Two college girls who had been walking by stopped and looked back at them.

For a moment they stood glaring at each other, but Rei realized that they would get nowhere fighting in a place like this. He relented. "No one's being a sectarian. It's just that we've been mobilizing to protect you, not to defend a specific sect ... that's why Doigaki and Amano ..."

"Got arrested, right?"

Startled, Rei clammed up.

"That's why I told them to let it be. Those dummies, getting all carried away ..." Aoki's words were disdainful, but his expression was twisted with pain. "But I can't be swayed by personal emotion."

"All right then, how about this ..." Rei voiced a thought that had just occurred to him. "I'll tell you what I know, but you have to tell me what you know, too. That way we'll still be even, and we can both maintain our positions."

"Another maneuver?" Aoki smirked. "That's not for me to decide ... but if we're only talking about information pertaining to the current situation, that shouldn't be a problem. I'll ask."

Rei had taken the ultimate risk with his parents in order to come here, and he wasn't about to go home empty-handed. Also, when he thought about it, it was a rare opportunity to be able to get information directly from the leader of the SR Faction. Even Gotouda couldn't talk to him unless he arrested him first. There was a certain amount of danger involved, but, with Aoki present, he didn't expect them to pull anything completely outrageous.

Rei convinced himself, satisfied with the idea of Gotouda's face when he came back with the information. "I'm just here to talk, right?" Rei made sure.

"Yeah ... just to talk," Aoki said.

Rei regretted his haste when he stood in front of the old school building.

It was not unusual for a small student party without a legal political organization to be headquartered on a university campus. Most partisan factions got their funds from their share of the party's government money, publishing proceeds from the upper organization, and the money they collected canvassing in the streets. However, groups that were big enough to be called mainstream factions came under the umbrella of university organizations such as student associations and co-ops, and they might make use of funds such as membership dues, proceeds raised at the campus festival, or operational stipends. In all cases, their fundraising ability tended to be proportionate to the size of the organization, and, for a small-scale partisan faction, a self-managed, on-campus facility, especially one in a blockaded building, was quite a commodity, both from an economic standpoint as well as a defensive one.

The three-story building that housed the SR Faction's headquarters appeared to have been blockaded for quite some time. The building had a strangely blackened wall with a rusty duct running across it, and its overall appearance was foreboding.

It was almost dusk, but there were no lights on inside. Clumps of tall weeds whistled in the wind, further dampening Rei's already withered spirits.

Heedless of Rei's mood, Aoki slipped through a gap in the barricade and went inside. Left alone outside, Rei contemplated turning and fleeing, but this was no time to run away like a scared child. Besides, he would have completely lost Aoki's trust if he had unilaterally refused to participate in a meeting that he himself had proposed.

He steeled himself and entered the building. As he crossed the threshold, a chill ran up his back that made him tremble.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could see the interior better. The long hallway extended through the first floor, littered with placards and lumber, and the walls were completely covered in slogans written in large letters. In that respect, it was exactly what you would expect to see in a barricaded building. But an oppressively chilling atmosphere permeated the place, and the building seemed completely deserted.

"This way."

Rei looked up. Aoki was motioning to him from the landing of the staircase, which was faintly illuminated by a solitary light.

The third-story room Aoki led him to seemed completely empty.

But, when Rei looked closer, he saw that there was a window in the wall opposite the door, concealed by heavy black curtains. There was no illumination, making the room even darker than the hallway. In front of the curtain there was a sofa, in the center of which someone was sitting. It took Rei several minutes to be able to see this.

Aoki fetched a wooden chair from a corner and set it down in the middle of the room. Apparently, Rei was meant to sit.

Rei sat, and Aoki retreated to the edge of the room. The man spoke.

"Hyoudou has told me about you. You can call me Kariya."

His voice was low but resonant.

Rei took another look at the voice's owner.

The man's legs were spread slightly and he rested his elbows on his knees. His hands were clasped together, and his chin rested above them. His hair was slicked back, an unusual hairstyle for an activist. His hands and his broad forehead looked eerily white, perhaps because of his dark clothing. His eyes looked down at the floor in front of Rei, but they were hard to make out in the shadow of his deep eye sockets.

"Talk," Kariya said, without moving a muscle.

"Just a minute!" Rei said. He took a breath and tensed his stomach to steady his voice. "I want information from you, too, in exchange for what I have to say. Of course, I have no intention of interfering with your internal affairs, so you can just tell me whatever you can. Those are my conditions."

When he began to speak, Rei found that the words came out more smoothly than he had anticipated. He had expressed himself pretty well, he thought. But the man simply repeated himself as if he hadn't heard a word Rei had said.

"Talk ..."

Rei interpreted this as the arrogant and dictatorial manner unique to a partisan faction leader, and his face stiffened. The man showed no indication of noticing Rei's reaction.

"What did you see that night?"

What did you see that night ...

The words echoed in his mind along with a feeling of déjà vu, and Rei cursed his own immutable fate.

The first to ask Rei this question had been Gotouda, and the next had been Aoki. The inexplicable feeling of guilt that welled up inside of him when he heard these words was unbearable. The root of this feeling—the secret he couldn't tell anyone—was being probed again by this man.

The man raised his head.

He unclasped his hands and rose from the sofa as if he were unaffected by gravity. In his cramped pose Rei hadn't noticed, but the man's arms and legs were unusually long, giving the impression that he was incredibly tall.

But there was something critically wrong.

This man who called himself Kariya resembled a human being in form, but, in some subtle but crucial way, he was unlike a human being.

"You saw it ... *you saw what the girl killed.*"

The instant he heard these words, Rei froze in his chair as if an electric shock had run through him. Instinctively, he opened his mouth to respond, but the only faint sound that leaked out of him was his rasping breath.

Kariya gazed down at Rei, who cowered in his chair.

"That detective, Gotouda. Who is he? What does he know? Why is he sniffing around?"

The man's eyes glowed faintly in the darkness, like those of a carnivorous beast. He moved closer to Rei.

Rei looked away and turned toward Aoki, who was standing back against the wall with his arms casually crossed, looking down at the floor. His face was expressionless, as if he were completely unaware that, just in front of him, his friend was being cornered.

His was not the face of a friend in any sense of the word.

An overpowering sensation of despair washed over Rei as he realized that he had been trapped.

"Speak. Tell me everything you know."

By now, the man was so close he was almost touching Rei's knees. He stared directly into Rei's face.

This was the evil eye Gotouda had mentioned.

When the man grabbed Rei by the shoulders, a sensation of release ran through his entire body; his muscles, tensed in resistance, relaxed as if they had been plunged into warm water.

It wasn't a feeling of paralysis. Rei's senses were still sharp, but he felt as if his soul had left his body and he was looking at himself from somewhere else.

The corners of the man's thin lips curled upwards, and a stifled laugh leaked out.

Kneeling on the floor, the man lifted Rei's left arm into the air and explored his wrist with the strong, nimble fingers of a violinist.

Rei's watch fell to the floor.

A blue vein bulged in Rei's arm as the man tilted his head slightly and brought the wrist toward his mouth.

Rei gazed at the spectacle as if it were happening to someone else. Now, at his last hour, the face that floated

into his mind was not that of his lamenting mother nor the confounded expressions of Shibano and the others. It was Gotouda's mongrel, dog-like face.

That old fogey guy had gotten them wrapped up in this case, but in the end he'd never been any help at all.

Rei cursed Gotouda as he closed his eyes and resigned himself to his fate, like a child in elementary school getting an inoculation.

One ... two ... three ... several seconds ticked by, but the sharp pain Rei anticipated in his wrist didn't come.

Fearfully, he opened his eyes.

The man was still, his eyes like glass orbs rotated up toward the ceiling. His face seemed oddly relaxed, his jaw hanging slightly, and the supernatural vibe of a few moments ago was gone.

Surprised, Rei glanced toward Aoki. He, too, was gazing off into the distance, absolutely still.

Rei had the eerie feeling that time had stopped for everyone but him.

Suddenly, the man thrust Rei's arm away, stood up, and strode quickly out of the room.

Aoki followed.

As he sensed them getting further and further away, Rei felt not so much relieved as completely at a loss. He tried to get up but tripped over his own feet and fell to the floor.

Rei's knees were trembling convulsively as he hugged them to his chest and let out a groan, but the deep whiff he had gotten of the floor's oily pungency revived his numbed consciousness. He could hear the footsteps of a

large number of people running through the lower floors. Somewhere, a pane of glass shattered.

He sprang to his feet and raced out into the corridor. Out of nowhere, men appeared carrying iron pipes and bars, running past Rei and disappearing down the stairs.

This was obviously some sort of emergency, but the men's behavior was bizarre. Not a single one gave Rei a passing glance, nor were there any shouts.

Below, he heard the sound of a pile of lockers crashing to the ground.

Holding back the urge to cry in frustration, Rei racked his brains to get a grip on the situation.

It was inconceivable that a riot squad would attack a barricade on a university campus without any sort of notice or warning; staging an ambush was out of line with the character of public procedures. The only possibility that Rei could imagine was that an attack by another partisan faction had taken place, but, if that were the case, why had the men who had charged past a moment earlier not even glanced at Rei, an intruder in their midst?

Rei shook his head, banishing his questions.

This was no time to be pondering such things. He had no idea what was going on, but he had only just narrowly escaped Kariya's fangs, and all would be lost if he stood here mulling over an unrelated interfactional conflict. Whoever was attacking, this was Rei's only chance to escape. He summoned his courage and began to run in the opposite direction from where the others were headed.

Rei came to the central staircase. After a moment's hesitation, he climbed through the barricade and began

to run down the stairs. He could have tried hiding out in one of the empty rooms, but there was the risk that if the attackers won, they would hunt him down and jump him. If the defenders won, he might have missed his only opportunity to escape. Even if it meant risking a run-in with the attackers, he had to get out of this hellhole, and the monsters like Kariya that haunted it, as fast as humanly possible.

Rei flew down the stairs, taking ten steps in only a few strides. But when he reached the landing, his legs failed him.

Saya appeared just below him in the stairwell on the second floor, her pleated skirt fluttering. Rei swallowed a scream and flattened his body against the ground. On his hands and knees, he scrambled back up the stairs as fast as he could go. If he was still for even a second, he was afraid that his body would go limp and he wouldn't be able to move.

Rei cursed his fate again. In a place like this, in a situation like this, why did he have to come across Saya on top of everything else? If he could have, he would have wept aloud. Of course, he couldn't afford to weep or to go limp. In complete desperation, he tumbled out into the corridor on the third floor, crawled into the shadow of the barricade, and rolled himself into a little ball.

He was streaming with sweat and out of breath when Saya appeared in front of him.

She advanced through the hallway, her chin slightly lifted, her eyes narrowed as if trying to sense something far away. Suddenly, a man waving an iron pipe came up from behind her.

Her right hand went to the pommel of her sword at the sheath hanging down at her left side and, with measured

precision, she thrust the sword backward—directly through the man's solar plexus.

The man rebounded backwards as if he had struck an invisible wall. He tumbled down the staircase, out of Rei's sight.

Saya had not turned her head or even slackened her pace. She continued up the stairs toward the roof as if she knew exactly where to find her prey.

Rei crawled out of his hiding place and peered down the staircase. Three men lay crumpled in a pile on the landing. The two underneath appeared to have been crushed by the man who had fallen from above.

Rei strained to hear what was happening below.

Saya couldn't possibly have wiped out all of those men, but sounds of the battle he had heard only moments earlier had evaporated.

If he were to escape, he had to do it now, with Saya having gone in the other direction. Rei knew this, but he found himself rooted to the spot.

If the invader was Saya, the target of the attack had to be the man who had called himself Kariya, and it was highly probable that Aoki was with him right now. There was no direct reason for Saya to harm Aoki, but if he tried to sacrifice himself to save Kariya ...

Rei still hadn't forgotten the cold-blooded look Saya had given him that first night.

He was a complete coward, but he wasn't sure he would be able to live the rest of his life with the knowledge that he had fled and left Aoki to die.

He picked up the iron pipe that lay at his feet.

He was more than aware of the fact that an iron pipe was no match for the swordsmanship he had just witnessed, but it was better than facing death empty-handed.

He went up the stairs after Saya, wishing he at least had a submachine gun.

The sun had set.

The rooftop was completely enveloped in the shroud of night, without a single safety light. Relying solely on the light from the windows of the nearby buildings, Rei crouched and surveyed his surroundings.

It had been darker inside and his eyes were well-adjusted. He caught his breath at the sight of two figures facing off, startlingly close.

The figure nearer to him was Saya, the night breeze ruffling her flared skirt. Farther away, he recognized Kariya's unmistakable silhouette.

Saya faced her foe at the ready. She crouched, the white sheath that hung down on her left side rotated behind her so that Kariya couldn't see it. Rei knew nothing of swordplay, but he could see from her stance that she was poised to draw the sword and kill her opponent in one swift movement.

Meanwhile, Kariya stood languid and motionless. He was unarmed.

Rei didn't understand why Saya, who had displayed such swordsmanship, hesitated to attack a defenseless opponent, but the murderous tension that pervaded the air was more than enough to make him falter. He backed away, trying to move behind the rooftop structure behind

him. Just then, his foot snagged against something and he tottered over backwards.

The iron pipe he was carrying went clanging to the ground.

Saya turned her head to look over her shoulder. At that moment, Kariya sprang into motion.

Saya struck, but Kariya evaded her by a hair, springing high into the air, turning a perfect backflip, and landing fleetly on the metal railing that encircled the rooftop.

Kariya emitted a faint peal of dry laughter, and Saya screwed up her white face and lowered the blade as if she had lost the will to fight.

Rei watched in awe, still sprawled on the ground. He wasn't sure, but it seemed that if Kariya's goal was to escape, the contest had already been decided when Saya had hesitated. If Saya moved now, Kariya would jump down and escape. Any normal human being would fall to his death, but, judging from the superhuman dexterity Kariya had just exhibited, it seemed quite possible that he could leap down the windowsills and ducts to the ground below.

But he didn't.

Still perched on the railing, he spread his legs, leaned forward, and stretched his long arms out behind him like a bird.

His arms slipped out of their sockets, making an unpleasant popping sound, and folded behind his back at what seemed like an impossible angle. His shirt ripped, baring his chest, and his ribs protruded sharply under his stretched skin. At the same time, the skin retreated from his face, his widened eyes and upper jaw began to jut out, his ears contorted, and fangs grew in his open mouth.

The word transformation did not sufficiently express what Rei was seeing.

This was a full-fledged metamorphosis.

The change affected not only Kariya's shape, but the skin all over his body. His twitching flesh quickly lost its vitality and turned a blue-black color, and his hollow stomach was etched with hideous wrinkles.

Finally, his arms split completely in two from his hands to his wrists and a thin layer of skin grew in, stretching all the way to each flank to form wings. His first three fingers curved inwards and lengthened into talons.

The animal he most resembled was a rat, but he retained a half-human form—an ungodly half-man, half-beast.

There was absolutely no way it could have been a wild dog, let alone a human being!

Rei repeated the thought in his mind over and over again as he lay in the indescribable state of having your legs give out while already lying on the ground.

It was just like the dead body he had seen that night.

Enormous, clawed wings, folded into the black sack ...

It had been so surreal, Rei hadn't been able to tell anyone. But the sight had been etched into his brain like a lingering nightmare.

And now the nightmare was reality, standing before his very eyes.

A gust of wind blew, and with it, Saya leapt suddenly forth. Pulling the sword to her right, she flew toward the monster as if walking on water, bridging the distance in a flash.

The beast's wings swelled with wind, making a sound as they unfolded.

Just as Saya's sword struck the railing from below, its tip sending off sparks, the beast leapt into the air. For an instant, it dropped out of Rei's line of vision but quickly reemerged before swooping off into the darkness, the sound of its flapping wings echoing behind it.

It was quite the escape.

Now the only sound was the wind, as if the awesome standoff and ghastly spectacle that had taken place just moments earlier had never happened.

Saya remained still for a moment, gazing off in the direction the monster had flown. She gave her sword a quick once-over and, with a soft cluck of her tongue, she turned on her heels. She retraced her steps silently, retrieving the sheath that she had flung to the ground. She slid the sword back into it.

The metallic sound brought Rei back to his senses and he tried to scramble to his feet. He finally noticed that the thing he had tripped over was Aoki, and, as he wavered over whether to pick him up or run away, Saya closed in on him.

This time, she would slaughter him for sure.

After all, this was the second time, and he had done more than just watch. If Rei hadn't interrupted, Saya wouldn't have lost her prey. Or even if she had, no doubt that was how she saw it.

She wouldn't let this go.

How could she?

For the second time that day, Rei closed his eyes in resignation.

One ... two ... three ... he counted in his head.

When he reached six, he opened his eyes just a crack, hoping against hope.

Saya was looking down at him.

Her eyes didn't burn with the cold ferocity he had seen on that first night. She was looking at him more like one might look at a dog lying in the road.

That's right, I'm a dog. I'm a worthless stray dog, not even worth killing. No, I'm a pitiful abandoned dog. A puppy! Rei begged her with his eyes as he returned her gaze.

If he could have, he would have turned into a puppy and wagged his tail for her. Just as this thought entered his head, the white scabbard flashed before his eyes and his ridiculous fantasies were shattered.

FOUR

Rei let out a moan as he came to.

When he realized that he was in the back seat of a moving car, he tried to sit up, but the moment he began to writhe in the deep, sumptuous seat, a searing pain shot through his head and the strength left his body.

He clutched the side of his head where Saya had struck him and moaned again.

“You awake?”

Rei’s heart sank as he looked for the source of the voice and saw the two men sitting in the front seat.

It was Saya’s backup team, the foreign duo. The one driving was the middle-aged guy who had recovered the corpse, and the one who had spoken to him from the passenger seat was the tall, older man.

Not that he had been expecting anyone else, nor had he harbored any wishful hopes of waking up in his own bed. But the fact that he was in their car was proof that this cursed night wasn’t over yet.

“It’ll probably hurt for a while. Saya’s not as gentle as I am,” the older man continued.

“I have a bump.” Holding his hand against the painful region, Rei did his best to voice his dissatisfaction with the situation.

"That bump means you won't have to worry about aftereffects ... you were knocked out with a very precise blow with no danger of fatal damage like cranial fractures or brain hemorrhaging. That takes a great deal of skill."

The man spoke as if Rei should have been grateful.

Wearily, Rei slumped down in the seat. Just then, he noticed the passenger riding next to him.

"Heya. Long time no see."

It was Gotouda.

"What are you doing here?" Rei was more exasperated than astonished.

"They got me. Same as you."

"Then ... you were *tailing* me?"

"You gave me a scare when you crossed the barricade with that Aoki character. You should really leave the dangerous stuff to the pros."

"And?"

"Well, as a detective, I couldn't very well enter a barricaded building. I was standing out there at my wit's end when that girl came busting through, and I thought I'd take advantage of the confusion to go in and rescue you. That's when these guys appeared on the scene. End of story." He calmly drew his explanation to a close.

"And you call yourself a cop?" Rei shot back, less angry than disgusted. A lot of help he'd been! "You couldn't have resisted or something?"

"Well, a badge is no match for a gun," Gotouda answered matter-of-factly. "It's my policy to do what I'm told when the other guy's got a firearm."

"I'm terribly sorry to interrupt ..." the older man po-

lately cut in. "There are blindfolds in the seat pocket ... I urge you not to peek or pull anything funny. I'd prefer not to have to use my high-precision skills again."

The shoulders of the middle-aged man in the driver's seat shook with laughter.

Rei was not amused, and he bristled at the men's smugness, which typified the attitude of the powerful over the powerless. Still, he was not at all interested in being hit again.

He and Gotouda obediently took the eye masks out of the seat pocket and put them on. At the last minute, Rei stole a glance out through the tinted windows. They seemed to be on the freeway and he didn't see anything noteworthy about the scenery.

"... Aoki told me that six of them had been wiped out already," Rei muttered in the darkness.

"What of it?" Gotouda asked.

"Aside from the three corpses that were found, how did he know that the other three guys were dead?"

"Because he helped kill them," Gotouda said with conviction. "He might not have done the deed himself, but he was definitely involved."

"Yeah, I guess so."

The killer had been that fiend that had called itself Kariya, but, from the way Aoki had handed Rei over, it was obvious that he was an accomplice.

The thought settled in Rei's chest like a weight.

It had been clear that something was going on with Aoki, but Rei had chalked it up to the secrecy characteristic of partisan faction members. Aoki was just another sort of victim—perhaps that was what Rei had wanted to

believe. Otherwise, it should have been obvious that a series of killings targeting a specific partisan group might be an inside job.

Now he had to swallow the fact that it was impossible that Aoki was simply another victim.

"Come on, don't take it so hard. You're too young to suspect a friend," Gotouda muttered, as if he had read Rei's mind.

"How long ago did you figure it out?"

"The day I went to your hangout. I warned you, remember?"

"Just me."

"Sometimes the most perceptive people can be the most blind, and sometimes you see something and you don't want to believe it. It makes things difficult, but that's how it is. That's how people are."

Rei's heart sped up as he tried to get at what Gotouda was really saying. In a low voice, he asked, "What do you mean by that?"

Gotouda sighed wearily. "I'm talking about that monster you've seen twice now!"

Rei sat up inadvertently just as the man swerved and suddenly slowed down, launching Rei forcefully into the back of the seat in front of him.

They must have been getting off the freeway.

"Sorry to interrupt," the older man said for the second time. "Now that you're blindfolded, would you mind shutting your mouths, too?"

The man's speech was crisp and polite, but it was steeped in a distinctive finesse that commanded obedience.

Gotouda, for his part, had zero flair, but his brazenness was a match for the attitude of the middle-aged foreigner. "You never told us not to talk," he countered.

"I'm telling you now."

Gotouda and Rei fell silent.

They drove on for about ten more minutes. After a brief stop, the car took a sharp left and they heard the sound of the tires crunching on gravel. After a few more minutes they came to a stop, and the two men led Rei and Gotouda out of the car.

There was no city noise whatsoever.

Rei had vaguely anticipated that they were being taken to the Israeli embassy, but, from the eerie stillness surrounding him, he sensed that he had been wrong. He took a deep breath of the chilly, outdoor air and caught the heavy scent of trees. He guessed that they were in the front yard of a mansion.

"Keep the blindfolds on until I say. Or else ..."

"High-precision skills, right?" Gotouda sneered back.

They tripped and stumbled repeatedly on the stairs, but somehow or other Rei and Gotouda managed to follow the two men inside. Judging by the way their footsteps echoed, the ceiling was high. Rei smelled the wood of the floor and walls, and he detected the fragrance of flowers; the place smelled ritzy.

They were dragged along such a circuitous path that Rei was sure they would have been lost even without the blindfolds. After some time, they were finally allowed to stop.

"Can we take off the blindfolds now?" Gotouda asked.

"I am terribly sorry for the inconvenience. Feel free to remove them."

The unfamiliar voice startled them. After pulling off the blindfolds, Rei and Gotouda stood blinking at the brightness of the room.

Rei was no expert when it came to architecture, but even he could see that the opulence of this place was extraordinary.

Every inch of the woodwork—pillars, paneling, and beams—was covered in ornate vegetal-motif carvings. But what really captivated Rei were the murals of countless animals that spanned all four walls. Naturally, the carnivores were represented: tigers, lions, leopards, cheetahs, and wolves. But there were also herbivores, including gazelles, elephants, zebras, sheep, bison, camels, elk, and giraffes. Then there were primates—gorillas, orangutans, chimpanzees, and baboons—as well as marsupials such as kangaroos and Tasmanian wolves. The rodents depicted included squirrels, flying squirrels, lemmings, and capybaras, and there were pinnipeds such as sea lions and seals. Even animals whose taxonomy was unclear—such as armadillos, duck-billed platypuses, and anteaters—were included, and everything was elaborately rendered in dazzling color.

Not only that, but the vaulted ceiling that arched high overhead was painted to look like a sky swarming with birds, and the floor underneath their feet teemed with fish depicted in an intricate, wooden inlay.

"Man!" Rei whispered. Further words eluded him.

With the animals on the walls, the birds dancing across the ceiling, and the fish embedded in the floor, the

room was a veritable three-dimensional panorama of the animal kingdom.

Rei felt faint when he tried to imagine how long a team of skilled artisans must have slaved to create such a work—not to mention how much it must have cost. He was clueless as to the intent of whoever had commissioned the project, but the room had a unique ambiance that invoked the same feeling of awe that imbued a place of worship.

“How about that! The room’s practically an illustrated encyclopedia. Kids must love it,” Gotouda said, letting out an exclamation of wonder.

“I’m sorry to say that we’ve never invited any children here. Please have a seat.”

Rei remembered where he was and turned to locate the voice’s source.

In the center of the room there was a wooden table also carved with some sort of floral pattern. Three chairs were positioned around it, and an elderly gentleman sat in one. The minimalist arrangement served to preserve the room’s ambiance.

They sat, as instructed, and Rei took another look at the older foreign man sitting in front of him.

His Japanese was fluent, but Rei couldn’t discern his nationality. His frame was thin—almost skin and bones—but his white hair was meticulously combed, his formal suit looked sharp, and his posture was impressively straight. His eyes betrayed a frightening intellect, his nose suggested the beak of a bird of prey, and his thin, tightly drawn lips gave him a stern appearance. He cut a figure that any man might aspire to in old age.

Even put together, the pair of them—a middle-aged man who was sloth personified and a young punk whose only redeeming quality was his rebelliousness—were obviously out of their league. Rei was overwhelmed.

A man that looked like a butler—no, he most certainly was a butler—appeared pushing a cart laden with tinkling glasses. He looked like he probably ironed his newspapers every night, and then ironed himself while he was at it. He approached the older man, bowed, opened a bottle of wine with a flourish, poured a small amount into a glass, and set it in front of the elderly man. The man waved his hand, indicating that he would forgo the tasting process. The butler lined the table with glasses and filled them up at an astonishing speed.

“Would you mind bringing me an ashtray?” Gotouda asked, as if he were speaking to a waitress in a coffee shop.

The butler scowled ever so slightly, but at a nod from the old man he bowed and walked off, leaving the cart.

“Drink,” the old man urged the two of them, without touching his own glass.

The only wine Rei had ever had was Akadama Port Wine, and he’d hated the syrupy sweetness of it. He’d have preferred beer to wine, and, while he was preferring things, he wished he had something to eat.

The large helping of curry he’d had for lunch was a distant memory, and since then he had walked all over Ochanomizu and run around in a barricaded building. His hunger was reaching a climax. But he didn’t imagine that this elderly gentleman would order him takeout pork cutlet with rice, and this room didn’t look like an appropriate place to eat takeout, anyway.

Rei resigned himself to drinking the wine.

There was perhaps the faintest hint of acidity, but the moment the wine trickled down his throat an indescribable fragrance filled his mouth and nose. A pleasant sensation seeped down the length of his esophagus, all the way to his stomach.

Aside from the fact that the wine only whetted his already raging appetite, Rei had to admit that the stuff wasn't bad.

"A Bordeaux ... Lafitte?" Gotouda murmured, and Rei gawked, very nearly spraying his mouthful of wine all over the old man.

It was inconceivable that a Gotouda could know wines. Rei was sure he was bluffing, but he noticed the glimmer of a change in the way the old man looked at Gotouda.

Quickly, however, the glimmer disappeared into an evasive smile. The man began to speak, his tone relaxed. "I'd like to ask you two some questions, now that everything has calmed down."

"Just a minute!" Rei put down his glass.

Perhaps it was the alcohol, but when Rei realized that he had been brought here to talk and that there was to be no violence, he felt a rush of confidence of the kind that fortified his only skill: the ability to stand up to adults in a confrontation. Of course, the duo with their high-precision skills were probably still somewhere in the building, and he was sure that the old man could make them appear any time he wanted. Rei would cross that bridge when he came to it.

Rei ignored his raging hunger and prepared to fight.

"I have some questions for you, first. After you answer them, I'm happy to talk all night."

Gotouda looked impressed.

The old man looked Rei in the eyes and smiled benevolently. "At my age, I can't talk all night, but go ahead. Ask away."

"I won't pry as to where we are, but who on earth are you? From the way you go around kidnapping a cop and a minor like it's no big thing, I hardly imagine that you're an upstanding citizen."

"Is that all?"

"There's more. That freaky Saya girl ... I don't know if you're her sweet old grandfather, her boss, her manager, or what, but I want to know about her, too. I'm no expert in sword fighting or martial arts, but the way I saw her move in that barricaded building wasn't human. And ... this is only my personal impression ... but it seemed like she shared something in common with the man she was trying to kill in there."

"I see."

"And another thing. What happened to my friend, Aoki? The girl knocked me out so I didn't have a chance to check whether or not he was still alive."

"Are you done now?"

Rei hesitated.

There was something else he wanted to ask, something he really needed to know, but he hesitated.

"Go for it. This is your chance." Gotouda spoke lightly, staring off into space with a serene expression on his face.

Rei downed the rest of his wine in one swallow and looked fixedly at the old man. "That thing ... the dead thing I saw that night, and that monster that flew off and escaped after she cornered it on the roof ... what the hell was that?"

When the words came out of his mouth, it was so easy that it was hard to believe what a heavy burden his secret had been to him. There was the fact that everyone present knew that he was speaking the truth, but Rei also realized that no matter how monstrous something is, when you put it into words, it turns into a plain old fact. This epiphany was like a breath of fresh air.

He still didn't know if they would be allowed to leave this place alive, but even so, he felt refreshed for the first time since having become involved in the whole mess.

The old man gave him a satisfied smile and refilled Rei's glass.

"I'll start with who I am ... unfortunately, I can't give you my name. I work for a certain private organization—a sort of foundation, you might say—and I'm in charge of the group's operations in this country. As far as the young girl is concerned, I am of course neither her grandfather nor her boss. The word manager might be the most apt, but I doubt very much that she considers herself managed by anyone ... Your personal impression, while not 100 percent on the mark, is not far off, either. The truth, however, is not exactly what you might imagine."

"Might I ask you to elaborate?" Gotouda countered with perfect composure, but the old man continued his oration at his own pace.

"In order to understand, things must be explained in order. This is especially true when the matter concerns something divorced from what we commonly accept to be true. This may sound like a digression, but please understand that I don't want to jump immediately into something that will only confuse you."

"What about Aoki?" Rei urged the old man, sensing that this might take a while.

"He's alive. We're concerned solely with the ringleader. Your friend is just one more follower, and our purpose is not to shed unnecessary blood."

Rei wanted to ask what the man meant by the words ringleader and follower, but he doubted that the man would tell him yet. He decided to keep quiet and listen.

"Saya doesn't have much patience and tends to overdo things, so I wouldn't be surprised if he had a broken bone or two," the man chuckled in amusement.

Rei was well aware of her capacity to overdo things.

A broken bone was nothing, and for a moment Rei forgot where he was and let out a sigh of relief. With all the commotion, no doubt someone would have called an ambulance by now.

"And as to the last question?" Gotouda, who was slumped casually against the back of his chair, raised his head slightly. "The thing the kid saw ..."

"I didn't just see it. It almost killed me," Rei corrected.

"I doubt it intended to kill you ... well, never mind that. Technically speaking, you're wrong to call it a thing or a monster, because actually, it is human. It isn't a *Homo sapiens*, but it is definitely a primate of the family *Hominidae*."

“Human beings don’t grow wings and fly.”

“Actually, it didn’t grow wings, its arms turned into wings. And it wasn’t flying, it was gliding,” the old man corrected. “If we must give it a name, we might as well go with tradition and call it a vampire ...”

Rei and Gotouda were silent. The old man twisted his mouth and let out an eerie laugh.

The butler returned, carrying a silver ashtray and a cigarette case on a platter. The ashtray was finely crafted with an engraving of woven vines, and was clearly not made with cheap cigarettes like Echoes in mind. Apparently, the man preferred plant and animal motifs for all of his belongings, not only his interior décor.

Gotouda reached for the cigarette case without waiting to be invited, lighting up with a silver lighter with a dragonfly inlay. The faint smell of spices wafted through the air, and Rei thought he might like to try one, too, but changed his mind and put a Long Peace in his mouth instead.

Under the gaze of the silent old man, Gotouda and Rei sucked hungrily at their cigarettes.

“You don’t seem terribly surprised,” the old man stated, as if to get the conversation rolling again. He hadn’t touched the cigarettes or wine.

“It didn’t look like the vampires I’ve heard of,” Rei said.

“I’d be very interested to hear what sort of vampires you’ve heard of,” the old man said.

Fragments of vampire movies flickered through Rei’s mind. “They’re tall with bluish-white faces, and they wear capes with red lining. They live in aristocratic castles, and sometimes they’re homosexuals, but during the day they

sleep in coffins and at night they find beautiful virginal women, or just regular beautiful women, and they bite their necks and drink their blood. The victims die but then they come back to life as vampires, but if you drive a stake into their hearts they scream and turn to ashes. They don't like garlic, crosses, or the sun, and sometimes they transform into bats or wolves, and unless someone kills them, they have eternal life ..." As he listed off his points, Rei himself became exasperated with how banal they were and, disgusted with himself, he trailed off.

"Is that all?"

"I'm talking about vampire movies. Fiction."

"Exactly. The fruits of the sexual fantasies of second-rate film directors. Just like the novels of Bram Stoker that they're based on, they're a heap of ridiculous nonsense. But what about the folklore that Bram Stoker used as reference?"

"They're beefy with ruddy faces, or they're black as night. Most crawl out of farmyard graves. They target the area near their victims' hearts. They're known to transform themselves into nocturnal animals, that is to say, the type of scavenger animals that tend to lurk where there are rotting corpses ... in other words, the regional paradigm constitutes an amalgamation of universal phenomena associated with death," Gotouda recited mechanically, as if reading a script. He stubbed his cigarette out in the fancy ashtray and went on. "But whether we look at sexual fantasies spawned by the entertainment industry or folklore created to piece together a sense of reality in an era when information was limited, that doesn't change the fact we're talking about fiction—things that don't really exist."

"But since olden times," the old man said, "there have been what we might call vampires ... no, they definitely are vampires. The only thing they have in common with the mythological ones is that they suck blood, are extremely sensitive to ultraviolet rays, and are able to change their physical appearance ... unfortunately, they don't have eternal life. They have surprisingly long lifespans, but they do age gradually and eventually die."

"They don't live forever," Rei said, somehow disappointed.

"Eternal life is an extreme concept, nothing more," the old man said. "Aging and death are essential chapters of the life cycle, as is birth. If something never grows old or dies, that means it was never alive. While we're talking about very unique beings, I don't want you to forget that they are living things."

"Okay, man, never mind the eternal life thing. It seems to me that the other three characteristics you mentioned are already beyond the realm of the unique." Rei knew it was inappropriate to address an elderly person as "man," but he figured it was the gentleman's own fault for declining to introduce himself.

Either the man had infinite patience or he considered it beneath his dignity to let a bratty punk get under his skin (Rei was pretty sure it was the latter), for he answered Rei's question without exhibiting the slightest irritation.

"A number of living things suck blood in order to feed, and, in this sense, the act is not unique. This is true of annelids such as leeches, as well as eels and other cyclostomes. The consumption of body fluids is commonplace among insects and arthropods, and even among

mammals—in the order Chiroptera there are examples of bats who drink blood as their sole means of nourishment. It's true that there are few species of higher mammals that subsist chiefly on blood, and almost every carnivore enjoys the blood of its prey—the phrase 'like a beast starved for blood' is not just a metaphor. In fact, the fear and revulsion of these creatures was one factor that gave birth to the idea of vampires, not vice versa. I expect you can also appreciate the fact that the same logical conclusion emerges if we consider how human beings feel about nocturnal animals that shun the light of day."

"But I've never heard of an animal that transforms itself," Rei argued.

"Transformation doesn't exist. But metamorphosis does. If we ignore the irreversible metamorphoses of certain insects and snakes who shed their skins, there are rare but definite examples of animals who change their appearance reversibly, such as chameleons, frilled-necked lizards, porcupines, and scaly anteaters."

"A porcupine just puffs out its quills and rolls into a ball. It doesn't turn its arms into wings and fly through the sky."

"I told you—it didn't fly, it glided. When birds take flight, they balance by flapping their wings while running on their rear limbs to gather speed. Animals who simply jump from treetops and glide can never learn this behavior, no matter how they evolve."

"So, vampires descended from tree dwellers?"

"That's a fascinating theory if we ask ourselves what sort of offshoots the human race might have generated during the process of evolution ..." The man permit-

ted himself a sarcastic snort, but he quickly resumed his didactic manner.

"You are absolutely right about the fact that the examples I've given have to do with changing only posture or skin appearance and don't constitute actual shape changing. Setting aside primitive life forms like mollusks, species constrained by a skeletal frame haven't had the chance to develop the ability to change shape. The higher mammals developed specialized internal functions, and, particularly for those with an advanced nervous system, this made it difficult to achieve physical changes to the skeletal structure. Moreover, they'd already physically evolved to obtain food and establish their superiority over other species through body shape, specialized use of the hands and feet, and brain development that enabled the use of tools. In actuality, if we look only at existing species, the fact that none of them have those capabilities proves that fact."

"So actually you're saying—" Rei began, but the old man cut him off.

"I said that this applies to only existing species. I'm not saying that the history of evolution and the process of natural selection never promoted transformative abilities. If we look at the diversity inherent in the evolutionary process, there is a multitude of possibilities in terms of shape and function other than what exists at present. Only, almost all of these species died off."

"If you're saying that those things were the singular species that managed to survive, how do you explain that?"

"Because they were human," the old man said, leaning back slowly in his chair and folding his hands on his chest.

His hands were gaunt, and they lacked the age spots characteristic of an old person's, which somehow made them look unusually morbid.

"I don't understand. I hope you're going to explain." Gotouda seemed uncharacteristically dumbfounded by the old man's narration, and it was left to Rei to urge the man on.

"I said that its arms transformed into wings and that it glided through the air ... but that wasn't exactly accurate. More precisely, its wings as well as the rest of its body were compressed to imitate the phenotype of a *Homo sapiens*. This has been proven through anatomical studies."

Rei was sickened by the mere idea of dissecting a vampire. Then he remembered wondering what the foreign duo planned to do with the body they had retrieved, and his own imagination made him queasy.

The old man had referred to a private organization or foundation, but, now that Rei thought about it, the mafia and yakuza were private organizations, too. While these groups might prefer to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, they didn't have a problem with necessary bloodshed on a massive scale. No matter how refined he might look, this elderly gentleman belonged to a group of people who were not just killers, but also were perfectly comfortable dissecting vampires. The minute this thought occurred to Rei, his stomach turned to ice at how brazenly he'd spoken to the old man.

Seemingly oblivious to Rei's anxiety, the man continued. "Their skin is amazingly elastic, enough to adequately cover the inconsistencies of their shape

change. Underneath, the complex process of reconfiguring their skeletal structure is made possible by a specialized muscular system. Not only can it support the heavy weight of their bodies when they glide, its distribution is very different from that of our bodies. It is configured to enable this skeletal transformation—in particular, the strength of their joints and tendons is incredible. In terms of pure physical development, they are unmistakably the most powerful primates in history. Did you know that the gentle-looking chimpanzee has the strength to rip a person's arm off, if it so desires?"

"I didn't," Rei answered.

"In general, anthropoids that I ren't bats, hanging upside down in some cave. They actually descend from the same source as do chimpanzees, who swing from branch to branch with their long arms. Isn't that cute?" The elderly man appeared pleased, and again, his shoulders shook as he let out a muffled peal of laughter. "I apologize for digressing ... we were talking about why an evolutionary mutation that normally would have died out through natural selection managed to survive solely in this species." The man's smile disappeared. "When all's said and done, it's because of a certain specialized trait—they have survived by living among humans, a species that is completely peerless on this earth. Vampires should have been wiped out, not by nature, but by their cousins, human beings, from whom they diverged during the evolutionary process. But when our ancestors were still tribes of ape-men who used tools, vampires learned to mimic their form and to live parasitically among them. They survived because of

this specialized method of nourishment. *They adapted solely to human beings as they evolved.*"

"The hunting hypothesis ..." Gotouda said, finally breaking his silence.

The old man nodded emphatically.

"It's called the hunting hypothesis?" Rei asked Gotouda.

"Have you seen Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*?"

"I have. It's a masterpiece."

"There you have it."

There you have *what*? But before Rei could throw a fit over Gotouda's overly succinct explanation, the old man cut in.

"It's the theory that when a segment of the ape-man population takes up arms and begins a massacre, only then do they realize their human abilities."

Rei recalled the famous scene in which one tribe of ape-men attacks another, beating them to death with a gazelle bone. The bone is thrown up into the sky and, in slow motion, it turns into a space ship.

"Oh, that," Rei muttered.

"Yeah, that," Gotouda responded. "Human history revolves around the hunt ... our intellects, curiosity, emotions, and social constructs are all the result of our successful adaptation to hunting, and the human role of hunter supplied us with the requisite conditions that led us to civilization."

The old man ignored their Zen-like question-and-answer session and continued. "Hunting requires weapons, and to use weapons, we had to walk upright—you can't crawl on all fours. Walking upright enabled us to carry

weapons, food, and our young. Males were the providers and females were the nurturers, allowing children to grow up in a far more sheltered environment than that of other animals, and the existence of children as powerless dependants gave rise to the composition of the basic social unit—the family. Sophisticated hunting techniques led to social institutions such as efficient tools, techniques, and teamwork. This, in turn, contributed to the development of larger brains, which sparked a chain reaction, causing juveniles to become even more dependent, both physically and socially. In other words, everything we see as human can be traced back to hunting and to our resultant carnivorous diets.”

Rei had meant to proactively counter the old man’s proposal to talk by turning it around on him, but somehow the man had ended up in supreme control of the conversation. Rei regretted this development, but he was completely clueless as to where this filibuster was leading, and he was overwhelmed by the man’s erudition.

“Have you heard of a scholar called Raymond Dart?”

“Never heard of him,” Rei answered, half-rebelliously.

“He taught at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. In 1924, he discovered a certain fossil in Transvall, South Africa.”

“*Australopithecus africanus* ...” Gotouda intoned, as if chanting a mantra. “Approximately 120-centimeters tall, bipedal, with advanced incisors and canines, and a brain about the size of a gorilla’s, this carnivorous ape lived in east Africa approximately two million years ago—during the Quaternary period, geologically speaking. Dart inferred that this fossil was the link between predatory apes and

human beings. He announced his findings to the academic world and took a thorough thrashing ...”

The old man nodded in satisfaction, and Gotouda continued.

“At the time, the prevailing theory was that human life had begun in Asia. We were also stuck with the fixed idea that the first attribute that spurred human evolution was a large brain. Dart’s theories were in direct opposition to these ideas. In 1953, Dart published *The Predatory Transition from Ape to Man*. In it, he writes that these anthropoids were ‘confirmed killers: carnivorous creatures, that seized living quarries by violence, battered them to death, tore apart their broken bodies, dismembered them limb from limb, slaking their ravenous thirst with the hot blood of victims and greedily devouring livid writing flesh.’ *Australopithecus* was also a cannibal who ‘ruthlessly killed fellow *australopithecines* and fed upon them as he would upon any other beast.’”

“Was this Dart guy really a scholar?” Rei cut in, disgusted.

“The hunting hypothesis was colored with a wash of the darkest moral disapprobation,” Gotouda answered. “Dart also says that these ape-men were just as skilled at hunting as humans would be. In fact, they might have been better, as they had less restraint.”

“There are scholars who disagree slightly on that point.” This time, it was the old man who interrupted. “The unique homicidal tendencies of human beings were rooted in the fact that humans were originally fairly docile omnivores with no natural weapons. This meant that they lacked the safety mechanism common to all carnivores that prevents the abuse of their ability to harm

others of the same species. During human evolution, until the advent of weapons suddenly upset the equilibrium between social restraint and the ability to kill, our ancestors had to bear the unpleasant experience of killing their prey with their own hands and teeth. This meant that they were very conscious of what they were doing, and any sane person wouldn't take pleasure in the act, even if only hunting rabbits ..."

"I believe it was Lorenz who said that man is a dove who suddenly acquired a raven's beak," Gotouda said with a wry smile. "In any case, there is no changing the fact that human nature is rooted in slaughter. 'Not in innocence, and not in Asia, was mankind born.'"

"Wasn't that Ardrey ... *African Genesis*?"

Rei was becoming irritated at the pedantic exchange between the two men. Gotouda explained, as if to placate him, "Ardrey wrote a series of popular texts based on the hunting hypothesis and Dart's ideas. The hunting hypothesis had existed for a long time, but Dart was the one who backed it up with scientific evidence. After that, the topic—how natural selection based on the hunt made human beings out of the higher apes, gave them a taste for violence, estranged them from the animal kingdom, and excluded them from the order of nature—enjoyed a small boom among intellectuals. The Kubrick movie you called a masterpiece is another example. But, in that case, the reason the ape-men take up arms is an iron plate that was left on Saturn by space men."

"It's the revelation of the knowledge of the universe," Rei corrected him. He had been in junior high school

when the movie had come out and he had been very moved by it. He had gone to the next city by train to buy the soundtrack, and he and his friends had had passionate debates about the monolith.

“It’s a ridiculous scenario. It’s just a filmmaker’s make-believe, it doesn’t even merit being termed hypothetical. Of course the real reason anthropoids took up weapons and began to kill was no such romantic encounter. It was the weather,” the old man said, shattering Rei’s fantasy. “The Cenozoic era, which preceded the Quaternary period, was extremely dry. The green areas of East Africa shrank dramatically, leaving only a few forests in Central Africa. In these sparse forests, the last remains of paradise, all kinds of animals struggled fiercely to survive, and our ancestors, the higher apes, were no exception. The battle for the fruits that grew in these forests was won by tree-dwelling apes. They remained in the forests and became the ancestors of the gorilla, while those that lost the battle were chased out into the savannas where they became *Australopithecus*. In order to find food in the savannas, they assumed an upright posture and learned to walk that way, acquiring the habit of hunting and eating meat. At least, that’s what Dart’s supporters claim.”

He hadn’t been holding out for the knowledge-from-outer-space theory, but still, Rei was a little disappointed at the news that the weather had been the root of human iniquity.

“In the Garden of Eden, the forefathers of the human race were banished for eating forbidden fruit, but in historical reality, the higher apes were chased out into the

desolate plains where they committed the sin of eating meat. The next part is my own theory: among the ape-man clans that were driven out of the forests, there were individuals who resembled them, but were actually different. They were a small subspecies of the tree-dwelling apes who had chased our ancestors out of the forests. If we assume that they had already developed into a nocturnal species capable of gliding down from the treetops to obtain food, it follows that they would also have developed the feeding technique of sucking blood.

“The reason I say this is that the act of flying is a balance between rapid energy consumption and one’s ability to feed. In order to fly, you need to obtain food. But consuming large quantities of food leads to weight gain, which directly impedes the ability to fly. You can understand what an inefficient mode of survival flight is if you consider the fact that birds, who fly by flapping their wings, were forced to evolve this capacity after exhausting every other possibility, and they have to spend every waking minute flying around to find things to eat. They eat to fly and fly to eat—but these new anthropoids were obviously mammals, and their only option would have been to cultivate a more efficient form of self-nourishment.

“Simplifying the digestive process by consuming blood.

“Moreover, this was conditional on being able to catch their prey with minimal effort. If they took all the time in the world, like the aristocratic vampires portrayed in movies and novels, they’d never make it. During the day, they expended as little energy as possible, and at night, they crept up on their victims and drank their blood.

Perhaps they secreted anticoagulants or sleep-inducing substances as do vampire bats, but, unless they were absolutely starving, they wouldn't suck their victims dry. If the victims died, it would only set off alarm bells, and, as long as they remained alive, the blood supply could be maintained. And the most effective way to sneak up on their quarry was to assume its shape ... they would conceal themselves near the targeted group and at night they would infiltrate the caves or dugouts where the ape-men slept and drink their blood, masquerading as members of the group.

Over the ages, their basic mode of survival has never changed. It makes sense, does it not, that every now and then someone would witness the act? These accounts were passed down and developed into the image we hold of vampires. Of course, some of them stayed in the trees, but, along with the other tree-dwelling anthropoids, they came to an evolutionary dead end and went extinct. Meanwhile, those who had left the forests evolved steadily, developing parallel to the *Australopithecus* because of their constant proximity, even mingling with them at times. Their brain capacity continued to grow, and to this day, they have maintained this specialized mode of life ... that's what I meant when I said that the reason they survived was that they were human."

"You have an incredible imagination. If that's what you believe, I still think the space-aliens-with-the-monolith theory is more credible," Gotouda said sarcastically. "Where's the evidence? At least Dart's theories have the *Australopithecus* fossil to back them up ... Why are there no fossils of these vampire people and their supposed parallel evolution?"

"I am sure you are aware that theories about the origins of human life are constantly revised every time a new fossil is discovered. Existing fossils that date since the time of *Australopithecus*, two million years ago, are too few in number to qualify as scientific evidence. The field is like a big blank page with a few lines of scripture written in the corner, waiting to be interpreted. At present, the quest to understand human evolution isn't anchored in scientific research. It's mired in the ideological disputes of status seekers. So long as our findings are interpreted in terms of preconceived biases, even if someone uncovers the complex skeleton of the upper-arm of a vampiric anthropoid, not a single person would speculate that these were wings, used to glide through the air. However, having seen the actual modern incarnation, if you still prefer to believe in the space-alien-monolith theory, there's not much I can say."

"Listen, buddy, if you're saying that that thing was the descendant of these sky-gliding vampire ape-men ... what the hell is it that you people are after? If you're out to avenge our ancestors whose blood has been sucked over the generations, I don't see the need for all this secrecy."

Every time Gotouda said "buddy," Rei wanted to jump out of his chair, but the old man showed no sign that he took offence.

"I beg your pardon, but I'm afraid that explanation will have to wait. As I stated earlier, this is in the interest of your own understanding ... I also hope you'll recognize that I'm making an exception by telling you all this in the first place."

In other words, *I'm being gracious enough to grant you an explanation, so shut up and listen.* Rei got the message. He put another Long Peace in his mouth, and Gotouda's hand reached out for one, too. Apparently, he hadn't liked the taste of the cigarettes on the table.

Anticipating that the old man still had a lot more to say, Rei took out another cigarette and gave it to Gotouda. The two of them lit their cigarettes and the old man resumed his lecture.

"I mention Dart not in the interest of strengthening my own theory by defending his. In fact, I even harbor doubts about the academic validity of his work. In recent years, it has come to light that human beings aren't the only primates that enjoy meat ... in fact, chimpanzees are known to steal meat from other predators and even kill others of their own species and eat them. Thus, the act of predation alone doesn't explain why our ancestors evolved into *Australopithecines* and chimpanzees did not. Also, another study has confirmed that even the nomadic tribes that populate the Kalahari dessert in the present day consume a diet that is two-thirds vegetarian. This negates Dart's idea that our ancestors had no choice but to become carnivores when they left the forests and began living in the Kalahari, which wasn't yet completely dry. It is obvious that these new discoveries and their implications contribute to anthropological refutations of the hunting hypothesis. And yet, why is the hunting hypothesis still compelling to me, and why do so many people continue to espouse it? The answer is that the hypothesis is a mere ideological tool, like so many other stories that explain

the origins of the human species. This is evidenced by the criticism that has emerged from diverse political standpoints. Pacifist anthropologists claim that the hunting hypothesis is no more than a means of relegating the sources of war and violent crime to our far-off ancestors, thus absolving ourselves of responsibility for the inhumanity we inflict on our fellow men. Feminists attack it for designating the hunter as an anthropological paradigm in which men are associated with technology and the provision of basic sustenance, promoting the idea of male aggression as necessary for hunting and for protecting the weak and passive females and children, and assuming inherent male dominance over females. Other critics denounce every aspect of the theory, claiming that the story of the killer ape-men is a mixture of biological fact and evolutionary theory, mired in the logic of Western myth, that simply rehashes the biblical story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden. The claim that the appeal of the hunting hypothesis has nothing to do with scientific evidence is probably right on the mark. Perhaps Dart provided nothing but excuses by way of scientific evidence, failing to prove the story of predation and the concomitant mistrust toward man. But consider this—it must have been unbearably depressing to imagine *Homo sapiens* as a psychotic ape-man, leaving a trail of blood in his wake as he roamed through the peaceful, green landscape. Nonetheless, almost since the day Dart published his work, his view of the world and of man spread pervasively throughout society. Perhaps the reason we find the hunting hypothesis so compelling is that it somehow indirectly

supports the fundamental values of our culture. The reason the myth of the killer apes remained popular was not because it reflected the tensions of the Cold War nor because of nostalgia for the story of Eden. It was because—at least in a symbolic sense—it was basically true. Don't you agree?"

"The eventual hell of life, the animal, toward which all evolution toiled and was damned, from the beginning," Gotouda recited, his expression bleak. He solicited another cigarette from Rei.

"Who are you quoting?"

"I forget."

FIVE

Of course, most of the proponents of the hunting hypothesis didn't simply hope to equate human beings with bloodthirsty animals. On the contrary, they felt that the concept of human beings as hunters who use weapons separated them from other animals and from the laws of nature ... Do you hunt?"

"I don't, and I don't want to. It's a stupid pastime of the bourgeoisie and those who aspire to imitate them." Rei intended to make his reply succinct, but the rebelliousness he had been suppressing made him long-winded. "I don't understand what's so entertaining about killing birds and animals, and I question the character of people who do. I couldn't care less if they misfire and kill each other now and again, but the fact that they kill animals and the occasional old lady who goes into the woods to collect herbs is unforgivable. It's the basest of hobbies."

The minute the outburst passed his lips, Rei was filled with self-loathing for having said more than was called for. But the old man appeared unaffected; rather, he seemed satisfied by this response.

"And you?"

"I avoid guns as much as possible," Gotouda answered laconically. It was a textbook answer for a member of the Japanese police force, but, in Gotouda's case, it was a convincing response.

"Modern hunters can't be explained in the same terms as their ancestors' circumstances," the old man said. "For our ancestors, hunting was almost the only convenient way to obtain affordable protein. Now, however, the act of hunting can only be understood as a symbolic act, as a kind of game or a religious rite. The feeling of excitement that the act engenders can also only be understood in a symbolic sense."

"I can't see how hunting is anything other than proof of man's brutality." Rei voiced this extreme point of view in part to express his disgust for hunting, but also because he was unable to contain the impulse to challenge the old man's show of intellect. He knew it was risky, but he was losing patience with being passively subjected to the man's pedantic soapboxing.

"The act of hunting merits consideration when we address how man has constructed his self-image through his relationship with animals. I'd like you to be patient and listen, in order to also understand why you revile hunting and what that revulsion means," the man added as if he could read Rei's mind. He continued, "The people we call hunters have a curious universal tendency, both historically and internationally ... they are the enemies of individual animals, but allies of the larger animal kingdom, and they have a strong affinity for nature, or the wild—the nonhuman domain where these animals dwell."

Rei thought about the outdoorsy middle-aged men that appeared frequently on TV and in magazines. They were always extolling the virtues of living in the bosom of nature and professing their disdain for city life, and yet they had no problem departing for the mountains in four-wheel-drive vehicles laden with state-of-the-art industrial goods. They spent a fortune on hunting and fishing gear, and gorged themselves on esoteric knowledge and rice cooked over camping stoves, never mind that they never set foot in their own kitchens. They had the arrogance to force their ways upon others and even felt a warped sense of duty to do so. They were a stupid and hypocritical bunch, and Rei despised them.

“Hunters have always led an ambiguous existence, straddling a dividing line ... In Greek literature, the hunter was embodied in the contrasting entities of Apollo, the god of light and reason, and Dionysus, the bringer of divine insanity. As polar opposites who represented human discipline on the one side and animal wildness on the other, these two gods reflected the symbolic significance of the hunt. By definition, hunting occurs at the boundary between the human domain and the wild—these two gods glare at each other from across that same chasm. The boundary upon which hunters exist is the periphery of the human world—the blurry line between man and beast. The ultimate embodiment of this phenomenon is Artemis, the goddess of the hunt. She personifies all of the ambiguity of the hunter ... she kills animals with arrows of anguish, and at the same time she is their friend and protector ...”

Maybe the old man had once been a hunter, Rei thought vaguely. Perhaps he had slaughtered countless animals with his own hands, and was now living out his old age in a room that resembled a shrine to the animal kingdom, surrounded by icons of the wild ... the image this suggested of the man's psychological landscape was painfully desolate.

"Since the symbolic meaning of the hunt was first explored by the Greeks, population growth has led to shrinking habitats, and hunting in the European world became limited to professional hunters and privileged aristocrats. It became a high-society form of entertainment. It was in thirteenth century France that the nature of hunting began to become divorced from the actual pursuit of nourishment. From there it spread rapidly to Britain and beyond, and the ruling classes' exclusive right to hunt was despotically and mercilessly enforced. Not only were farmers prohibited from hunting, they couldn't own bows and arrows, and they were even required to cripple their dogs to prevent them from chasing game. They were forced to serve, unpaid, as beaters and bearers during hunts, and poachers were subjected to severe punishments. Naturally, this extreme inequality in hunting rights led to differing perceptions regarding the pastime among the social classes. In the folklore of fourteenth century Britain, Robin Hood was still killing the king's deer in a game preserve, but in time a distaste for hunting began to emerge. In *The Praise of Folly*, Erasmus, the prodigal son of a priest, writes that hunting is mere butchery and deems it an idiotic pastime. In *Utopia*, Thomas More

judges it a mean, vulgar act, evidence of human depravity. Did you know that Shakespeare often used hunting as a metaphor for rape and murder?"

"No," Rei answered, fed up with both the old man's sententiousness and his own ignorance.

"My lords," Gotouda quoted in a monotone drone, "a solemn hunting is in hand ... The forest walks are wide and spacious; and many unfrequented plots there are ... Single you thither then this dainty doe, and strike her home by force, if not by words ..." He trailed off. "*Titus Andronicus*. You know enough Marx and Lenin, it's time you read some classical literature."

"Who asked you?" Rei countered. In fact, he had never read Marx and Lenin very devotedly and was secretly hoping that the old man wouldn't invoke them.

"But the most vehement of all was Shakespeare's contemporary, Michel de Montaigne. He agreed with More that hunting reflected a fundamental defect in the human soul, and in 'Of Cruelty' he writes, 'when the Stag begins to be embost, and finds his strength to faile him, having no other remedie left him, doth yeeld and bequeath himselfe unto us that pursue him, with teares suing to us for mercie ... was ever a grievous spectacle unto me.'"

"If I saw that spectacle, I'd find it grievous, too."

"As would I. But in society of that day, animals were still treated with a cruel mixture of disinterest and sadism. You mustn't forget that More and the others represented the views of a minority, and it took almost five centuries for these ideas to become widespread."

Rei imagined himself yielding and bequeathing himself to his pursuers, begging their mercy with tearful eyes. Would the old man find that spectacle grievous? Rei sighed and chased the image out of his mind. He doubted he could compete with a dying stag.

“Which brings us to the question: what is the source of the tension connected with hunting in these writings?”

“Resentment of the ruling classes,” Rei responded instantly.

“I see. Ah, yes, you’re one of those young, antiestablishment fighters,” the old man smiled condescendingly. “Unfortunately, Shakespeare and More did not condemn the privileged classes in their writings, and Montaigne himself was a member of the aristocracy. Thus, there had to be other reasons as to why they found hunting distasteful. One explanation might lie in the study of ancient literature. These sixteenth century authors were Renaissance humanists, and they were devoted to classical texts. Some of these texts might have exposed them to Greek and Roman culture. In fact, More’s *Utopia* smacks of the writings of Salustius, and Montaigne was obviously influenced by Ovidius and Plutarch.”

“Okay then, that’s why,” Rei shot back.

“But that doesn’t explain why the ideas of a particular era drew their attention. You could also say that their ideas led them to choose these classical texts ...” Again, Gotouda broke in as if to throw a lifeline to Rei, who was becoming more and more frustrated by the old man’s opaque manner of speaking.

“Even if there was a connection between the criticism of hunting that emerged in the sixteenth century and

class struggles or classical literature," the old man continued, "that still doesn't provide a sufficient explanation. There was something else behind the aversion to hunting ... there had to be some kind of new skepticism involved regarding man's relationship to the animal kingdom.

"Montaigne questioned hunting because he questioned the idea that humans occupied a special position. He refused to acknowledge an essential difference between men and animals. He professed that the spiritual abilities thought to be unique to human beings could be also construed from animal behavior. He believed animals capable of almost every intellectual ability other than speech, and he even went so far as to suggest that perhaps the fact that human beings could not communicate with animals was due to human, not animal, shortcomings. Just as we have a hard time understanding animals, animals feel the same way about us. 'They flatter us, threaten us, and implore us, and we them ...' I believe that Montaigne's skepticism reflected a mounting anxiety among intellectuals of his age. In contrast to the medieval view of the world, which was centered on the fate of the depraved human race, the Renaissance could be said to have been a time of multipolarity ... Nikolaus Cusanus declared that 'the world machine has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere.' Copernicus proposed that the earth was a mere planet orbiting the sun, and Giordano Bruno alleged that the sun was just a single star in the vast expanse of space. The non-European world was discovered through voyages of exploration and conquest, and the Protestant Reformation took place in Northern Europe. All of these developments

challenged the traditional view of the world, sewing seeds of infinite doubt. Montaigne was deeply dubious of man's superiority over animals ... however, this type of fundamental skepticism made people severely uncomfortable, and they couldn't tolerate it for long. Great thinkers emerged to transform this doubt into the realm of science ..."

Gotouda got up, walked over to the cart, and began to paw through the bottles. Whether or not he had been bluffing about the wine, the fact remained that he wasn't a man who looked right with a wineglass in his hand. In search of a drink that was more to his liking, he opened each of the ornately engraved glass bottles in turn and sniffed their contents like a dog.

"Can you elect to take philosophy classes at your school?" the old man inquired, baring his ignorance of the Japanese school system and its curriculum.

"We don't have philosophy, but we have something similar. It's called Social Ethics." The image of the Social Ethics teacher appeared in Rei's mind. The man was a dyed-in-the-wool reactionary, and was one of the ringleaders of the set that vehemently opposed Rei's group. "The teacher's name is Sekine. He's famous for always using the same example to illustrate the dialectical method. He says that if you 'overcome' a candle and a lantern, you get a light bulb."

The man gave Rei a look of intense sympathy. He had been attempting to check up on Rei's philosophical education, but now he seemed to realize that he was wasting his time asking questions. He closed his mouth and waited patiently for Gotouda to finish his search.

Sekine's classes aside, Rei was well aware that his philosophical education was wanting. Nabeta loved philosophy and was always getting all worked up over Heidegger or Wittgenstein. But the only books Rei had ever read seriously were Marx's *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, which partisan activists were wary of, warning that its existential tendencies went too far, and *The German Ideology*, which he had read because it was thin. Other than that, he had dabbled a bit in Kierkegaard and Sartre, but that was about it.

Gotouda poured himself a scotch and returned to his seat, and the old man resumed his speech as if he'd never been interrupted.

"In seventeenth century Europe, mechanistic philosophies were popular among the educated class. It was believed that the natural world was a great mechanism ..."

Here it comes, Rei thought, bracing himself.

"... within which only human beings possessed awareness. Animals were seen as mere robots made of meat ... this idea, in itself, was nothing new. The notion that the universe was a machine created by God that functioned independently—a kind of divine clockwork that never required resetting—had been the subject of endless debate among religious scholars in Europe, and Greek philosophers had postulated that humans were the only animals to exercise free will. The only thing that was really new about mechanistic philosophy was the idea that things weren't determined by fate and that everything that happened could be predicted. The entire natural world was thought of as a system governed by

set formulas that could be discovered if pursued by man. These ideas were reinforced by the achievement of significant mathematical strides in algebra, logarithms, analytic geometry, and calculus, which enabled mathematical hypotheses to be applied to basic physical phenomena. Rapid advances were made in the realm of physics, and the scientific revolution that began with Galileo's experiments reached its zenith when Newton discovered the law of gravity. Hydrostatics, pneumatics, magnetism, optics, astronomy ... because these sciences were often applied to nonliving things, the new worldview differed from previous ones in that it focused on the inanimate, and explanations of natural phenomena became mechanical in nature. Scientists of this new era used mechanical devices to explore the bodies of animals, enthusiastically cutting open and vivisecting cats and dogs even as their subjects writhed in agony. They experimented to see what would happen if they severed certain nerves or cut off certain blood vessels. They learned that the heart was a pump that sent blood through the body, and that arteries and veins were hoses. Scientists throughout Europe became enthralled in this kind of experimentation, analyzing the workings of muscles, the lymphatic system, and nerves in terms of mechanics and hydraulics. Hobbes, who was one of the most representative thinkers of the era, went so far as to suggest that life was the motion of limbs, that artificial life could be said to exist in all automata, or engines that move themselves, and that the human soul was simply the gaseous component of the machine that was man."

"Leviathan," Gotouda said, sipping his scotch.

"Compared to Hobbes, who was a hard-hearted atheist, Rene Descartes was a bit more delicate and pious. He believed that man's immortal soul was carefully housed in a location distinct from the workings of the world-machine. The reason he gave the soul special treatment was simple—he was fundamentally and absolutely skeptical of all other things. He reasoned that his thoughts were the only knowledge he could experience directly. He thought that everything he perceived in the world, including his own body, might be an illusion, and the only thing he could be certain of was his awareness of his own thoughts. The only truth in the universe was the recognition of his own cognition ... he uses this as a starting point to extrapolate the existence of God and the universe."

"*Cogito, ergo sum* ... the first principle of philosophy." Even Rei knew that.

"As a thinking being, he couldn't be divided or destroyed. He had to be immortal. But at the same time, Descartes knew he wasn't perfect. Thus, he knew that he had to have derived the concept of perception from something else that was perfect. Therefore, a perfect being had to exist, and that had to be what we call God. God would not cause us to suffer illusions, thus God must therefore exist in the physical world—"

"Ha! It's religion, after all," Rei blurted out, and the old man smiled wryly.

"According to Descartes, the heart and the body were both composed of substances that led equivalent existences, but, at the same time, these existences were

completely separate. He believed that everything in the universe was comprised either of pure material or pure spirit, and that only man was a mysterious combination of the two. Naturally, animals were material, and thus possessed neither emotions nor sensibilities. As to whether or not they had hearts, it was clear that animals couldn't speak ... Descartes' followers used this argument to justify doing biological experiments on animals without feeling the slightest sympathy or prick of conscience. They could kick their dogs to a pulp or dissect their cats without feeling an ounce of guilt. They scoffed at those who felt empathy for animals, and they deemed these animals' howls the sounds of a machine breaking down. They compared animals to clocks—their cries were no more than the motion of a little spring, emitted without feeling or sensation.”

“That’s horrible ...” Rei’s chest ached. *What were they thinking?* He felt the image he had held of Descartes crumble to the ground.

“Do you find that horrible?” the old man asked. “But there are similar stories in the medieval philosophical arguments that they were rejecting. A famous monk kicked a pregnant dog in the stomach in front of a pious and gentle nun. When she turned pale, the monk reproached her, saying that the dog was no more than a soulless piece of meat ... Did she doubt the teaching that God gave souls only to man?” The old man laughed dryly.

“It wasn’t simply that these new scientists were cold-blooded and cruel. No. Far from it. They took a great deal of pride in the holy duty of proving that human beings

were unique, and in proclaiming their reverence for that fact ... whether scientific or religious, when human beings try to assert their uniqueness, they always fall into the same pitfalls—absurd arrogance and acts of folly.”

“I’m sorry to say that I agree with you on all counts,” Gotouda said bitterly, tossing back a tumbler of scotch.

When Rei saw Gotouda drink, he got up and fetched himself a glass from the cart. Gotouda filled up both vessels with the amber liquid.

The scotch tasted very expensive, and Rei drank it down with a foreboding sense that it was more than he could handle.

“In any case,” the old man continued, “it was a harsh doctrine, and the world view of Cartesian scholars—that the interiors of the machines that are our dying bodies have an immortal, introspective, spiritual medium running through them—gave it an even gloomier outlook. The reason such a chilling viewpoint was able to rule the imagination of these great minds was that the goal of the new philosophers was not to toy with fruitless theories like the scholastics that predominated during the Middle Ages, but to expand man’s horizons and influence in the world. Bacon, who was a contemporary of Descartes, foresaw an experimental inquiry that would allow human beings to place limitations on the sovereignty of nature. This idea, however, would take root later, through the natural philosophy and science movement. Ironically, this science would do away with the distinction of the human soul as a material separate from nature, the idea that Bacon and Descartes had promoted. If you think

about it, it makes perfect sense ... science, by definition, seeks to define universal rules, and, ideally, the definitions provide universal systems by which all phenomena can be explained. Moreover, science seeks to realize these principles as technology through experimentation. The resulting inflation of human power is justified in an extremely realistic way. As a result, science inevitably portrays the universe as a realm consisting of uniform matter valued in terms of how human beings can use it. Science binds us in a Faustian contract—in exchange for the right to rule this world, which is comprised of uniform matter, we must agree that we are creatures of that same uniform matter. Scholars of Western thought resolved to look for loopholes in this contract, to allow men to bring spirit back into mankind and the operation of the world. *This attempt began with the bodies of animals.*"

Gotouda motioned to Rei that he wanted a third cigarette. In exchange, Rei proffered his glass for another double.

"This stuff isn't cheap," Gotouda said.

"It's not even yours!" Rei said, pointing out the unfairness of the trade. "These, on the other hand, are my cigarettes."

"May I continue?" the old man asked.

"Please do," Gotouda answered, refilling Rei's glass with scotch.

"The Cartesian method for circumventing this dead end was to deny the actual existence of mind-stuff and accept that our thoughts were a physical process. Some people refused to accept this, saying that it negated the existence of God, while others insisted that the Almighty could instill even a little piece of meat with sentience if

He so desired. It seemed that this debate would lead to another stalemate, but ultimately the goal was to rescue the soul, which had been half-banished by science. Faced with the prospect of returning to that dead end, people had no choice but to embrace the latter idea—even if it seemed somewhat unconvincing. Thus, there was more and more support for the belief that God could breathe sensibility and cognition into any material He chose. By the eighteenth century, most thinkers had rejected the Cartesian view that animals were soulless machines, and began to agree with the idea that the human capacity for thought was only just slightly elevated from the abilities of animals. As the barrier between matter and the spirit was lowered, the barrier between men and animals was demolished as well. As a result, an unexpected problem emerged—the *issue of animal suffering*.”

“... animal suffering?” Rei echoed in a tone of dissatisfaction. “You just said that they’d rejected the Cartesian notion that animals were soulless machines. Why are we back to the problem of animal suffering now?”

“It’s probably difficult for you to understand because you’re Japanese, but Western thought has always evolved spirally, orbiting the axis that is God. You must understand this if you’re to understand what I’m about to say next. Suffering isn’t just something that exists on its own, it’s something somebody inflicts ... in Christian terms, an example would be the passion and suffering of Christ.”

The old man twisted his mouth slightly and looked away. It was a mannerism he had exhibited several times, and, for some reason, it made Rei wince.

"Theologians have argued, quite justifiably, that human suffering is imposed for some kind of greater good. Whether it is inflicted through another person's malevolence, or whether it's the pain of remorse or misfortune, it leads us down the narrow path to paradise—or at least the possibility of it. Suffering is the manifestation of divine justice, and guilt and misfortune are expressions of His grace."

"What's so justifiable about that?" Rei said dubiously. "It's a standard ploy of the religious authorities, who have close ties to the political authorities, used to fool people into believing that the violence and economic exploitation by the powers-that-be represent salvation in the next life."

"'Religion is the opiate of the masses.' As a Marxist, I'm not surprised that you believe that."

"I'm not a Marxist."

"You're a radical, right?" Gotouda said tiredly. "Let's get on with this. Would you mind keeping a lid on it for a while?"

Rei didn't like Gotouda's tone, but he realized that it was pointless to quibble. The old man probably knew nothing of the Japanese antiestablishment movement. He clammed up.

"Human suffering is one thing, but it was difficult for them to reconcile the idea of animal suffering with the inherent grace of God. This was because, in the Christian tradition, animals were incapable of sin and lacked immortal souls. In other words, their pain couldn't be interpreted as retribution, and, therefore, as the manifestation of justice and salvation. Moreover, the main source of animal suffering, if you ignore hunger and illness, was being trapped and slaughtered by hunters.

"If animal suffering wasn't related to punishment or salvation, if it was simply the result of human cruelty, then the suffering was unjust. And, if the majority of the world was unjust, this called into question God's benevolence and omnipotence."

If the majority of animal suffering was caused by humans, it was because of human cruelty ... so what was all the fuss about? Rei wasn't thoroughly convinced, but he decided to keep quiet and not drag the discussion out.

"Descartes had avoided the problem by simply denying that animals experienced pain. However, Louis Racine, an eighteenth century Cartesian, addressed the problem head-on. He argued that it can be inferred from various things we know about God's grace that animals are not sentient because, if the helpless beasts were capable of suffering, it would mean that God was unjust. But as we know that God is just, we can conclude with confidence that animals are insensible, and we should not hesitate to hunt, slaughter, and eat them."

"That's insane," Rei protested, more bewildered than surprised or angry. "The logic is backwards. It's all turned around."

"Like you, the Enlightenment philosophers who accepted animal sentience as fact and questioned God's benevolence didn't accept this simplistic reasoning ... in fact, it wasn't just philosophers. The situation was grave enough that French vicar Jean Meslier and others lost their faith and became atheists when faced with this reality. One theologian concluded that a fair God would reward animals in the next life for their suffering. He

painted an image of billions of animals and birds being resurrected with the blast of a trumpet and pouring forth over the face of the earth. However, in order to avoid questioning God, many thinkers who struggled with the issue recognized that animal suffering was brought about by human beings.”

Well, duh! Rei thought.

His expression must have betrayed this sentiment, because the old man peered closely at him and inquired, “Do you like meat?”

For some reason, the question made Rei’s heart race. He remembered the day they had gorged themselves on short ribs and roast on Gotouda’s tab, taken home the leftovers, held a second feast at Shibano’s house, drank too much, and thrown it all up.

“I don’t dislike it,” he replied ambiguously.

“The philosophers of the Enlightenment who acknowledged that animal suffering stemmed from human cruelty didn’t dislike it either. The advocating of ethical vegetarianism resonated with Benjamin Franklin when he was young, and he ate absolutely no meat for an entire year. But one day, when he was on a boat where the fishermen were frying up fresh pieces of cod in hot oil, he came to the following conclusion—ethical vegetarians teach that eating any fish is an unjustifiable act of murder. If the fish was threatening our lives, we could justify killing it, but he knew that a codfish would never threaten his life. Still, he loved fish. Especially piping-hot, fried cod. As the fishermen split the cod open, a small fish came tumbling out of its mouth. Franklin reasoned

that if fish could eat each other, there was no law saying that human beings couldn't eat fish."

"So he ate it?"

"He gorged himself."

Hypocritical old goat! Rei thought.

"Recounting the incident later, he wrote, 'so convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for something one has a mind to do.'"

There was a short silence.

"Franklin wasn't the only one. Other Enlightenment thinkers were amazingly good at rationalizing their actions. Voltaire and Rousseau criticized the practice of eating meat but didn't abstain. Pope and Benson argued that if animals could be slaughtered painlessly, eating meat could be justified."

"Franklin and Benson were hypocrites," Gotouda said, "but they were sincere to the extent that they needed a rational justification to eat meat. That's not half as hypocritical as someone who takes for granted that animals suffer as a result of human cruelty but orders so many family-sized plates of short ribs that they need a doggy bag."

Rei tried to come up with a counterargument, but the words failed him. He had always considered himself a logical person, but now that Gotouda put it that way, perhaps he was not so very unlike the worst kind of intellectual, those who profess logical action but behave illogically, with absolutely no awareness of the logical consequences of actions.

A martyr to logic. The words popped up in the back of Rei's mind, but before he could meditate on them further the old man began to speak again.

“Many people joined the ethicists of this era in their view that eating meat, like hunting, was a questionable practice that needed to be justified somehow. These questions, in turn, led people to question human nature itself. Since the dawn of the species, the practices of meat eating and hunting were inexorable parts of human life. If these acts were unethical, the hunting hypothesis was correct. As a result, the first killer ape appeared in Western European literature in the eighteenth century.”

“You’ve heard of Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*?” Gotouda asked Rei.

“Yes.”

“Have you read it?”

“I read a picture book version when I was a kid.”

“It’s in Part Four, the part about the Yahoos, which are barbarian ape-men who live in the land of the Houyhnhnms. It’s not the sort of thing they’d put in a picture book.”

“I’m getting tired,” the old man said. “Perhaps I’ll have one, too.”

Rei hesitated for a moment, but then he got up and fetched another glass for the cart. Gotouda filled it with scotch.

The old man took a tiny sip, closed his eyes, and was still.

It was an exhausting undertaking to examine human beings, much less to give a dispassionate account of man as a member of the animal kingdom. Even for this steely old man, perhaps it was a task that required the occasional break. Rei pondered the idea vaguely as he smoked his cigarette and waited for the man to reopen his eyes.

He wondered what Gotouda was thinking.

Even when his cigarette had turned completely to ash, the old man still hadn't moved. Rei began to get worried, but, just as he moved to get up and peer into the old man's face, the man began to speak again, his eyes still closed.

"By the late eighteenth century, most intellectuals were sick and tired of hearing that men were mere animals, and not very decent animals at that. Johann Gottfried von Herder flew into a rage, complaining that Rousseau, Voltaire, Buffon, and everyone else were holding the human species in contempt. Young French and German intellectuals rebelled against the materialist and empiricist philosophies of the Enlightenment, triggering the beginning of Romanticism."

The old man opened his eyes.

"The leading philosophers of the Enlightenment had been materialists, who believed that the mind was part of the workings of the body. The Romantics took their cue from Kant, developing the idea that matter itself was a great mental illusion. How did the Romantics see man's relationship to animals? Their attitude was an incomprehensible mixture of hatred and love. To them, wild animals were at once inferior beasts and symbols of the divine. Humans were higher, more intelligent beings than animals, conscious of the backdrop of spirituality against which the world was set. This self-awareness meant that humans could only participate in life for a fleeting moment. Shelley's skylark overflowed with the deep joy of unawareness, something men could never feel. The Romanticists despised hunting and meat eating, and they criticized man's exploitation of animals. On the other hand, they suffered from the inability to comprehend the animal world—why God's

creatures were incapable of recognizing His grace, why the earth was so full of predators and parasites, why predation was repeated up and down the food chain. Confronted with these issues, the poet William Blake detected the scent of carnage in God's divine will, and Lord Tennyson lamented that nature was a plunderer. Not a single philosopher or theologian was able to answer these questions. With advances in geology, more and more fossils were unearthed, and it came to light that species had a lifespan, too. Scientists discovered that most animals that had existed in the past were now extinct. This illuminated God's mercilessness toward His creatures, man included."

"From scarped cliff and quarried stone, she cries, a thousand types are gone, I care for nothing, all shall go," Gotouda muttered, draining his glass.

"You forgot who said that, too, right?" Rei said.

"Not that I want to remember," Gotouda replied.

"In order to link pain, suffering, death, and extinction to a higher cause, a solid justification of nature's cruelty was called for. This justification would be provided by Darwin.

"Faith in progress is relatively new. Up until the seventeenth century, the widespread view of history in Europe was that the world and the human race had been in a steady decline since the golden age of the ancients. Both Jews and Christians held the story of the expulsion from Eden to be holy writ. However, the ancient theme of the degeneration of natural man was transformed by scientific progress to a more optimistic attitude that things improve with the passage of time. Faith in progress also influenced our understanding of a larger order in terms of nature

and our place within it. Christian thinkers classified all of creation in a great *scala naturae* that spanned inanimate objects, plants, and animals, all the way up to the realm of angels, the purest beings of all.

“Like the social order, this hierarchy was not static. It was subject to an endless historical progression of upward motion, like an escalator. Lower organisms became higher organisms, animals became men, and, one day, men would elevate their spirits to become angels. In this manner, every living creature was climbing a ladder toward God. Charles Bonnet, an imaginative French biologist, described a vision in which in the distant future human beings would become the creatures of a higher dimension and would be replaced by upgraded animals. These mystical fancies and dreams set the stage for the biological theory of evolution.

Thoughtful biologists such as Erasmus Darwin and Lamarck published the concepts that made up the prototype for the scientific theory of evolution—the intrinsic principles that gave rise to an ever-increasing superiority as lower-level ancestors develop into the plants and animals of the present—as a sort of pseudoscientific story. Evolutionary thought gained the support of geologists ...”

Having succinctly wrapped up the prehistory of evolution, the old man turned to Rei and asked, “Do I need to go into the part about Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace advocating the theory of evolution by natural selection?”

“Even I’ve read *The Origin of Species*,” Rei rejected the offer firmly. The man seemed to think Rei had the education of a junior high school student, and it wounded Rei’s pride.

The Origin of Species was considered by activists to be an important text to read as part of one's ideological education. Rei had acquired a used copy at a bookstore and had somehow gotten through it, cursing the terrible writing of the translated version the whole way through.

"Basically, Darwin thought that, instead of a machine-like God planning and intervening in natural development, nature progressed by blindly, developing through chance more than through decision. His ideas were revolutionary, and, importantly, they reconciled the Romantic belief in the spiritual elevation of the natural world and the issue of nature's cruelty and mercilessness. He reinterpreted cruelty as the physical race to survive, and explained both phenomena as two aspects of the same larger system. Meanwhile, the non-interventionism of Darwinism had clear similarities to the political-economic theories of the Victorian era—the social theories of Malthus and Spencer influenced Darwin more than he influenced them. Undoubtedly, Darwin and Wallace were able to conceive of the idea of natural selection because they embraced the concept of survival of the fittest proposed by Spencer, who recommended in his 'Principle of Population' that the children of the poor be allowed to starve in order to save society from ruin. He justified the wretched fate suffered by the destitute in a laissez-faire capitalist system, comparing it to interspecies selection wrought by the harsh laws of nature."

The antiestablishment movement also considered Malthus and Spencer's writings essential texts, to be read critically; Rei had forgone them, however, having absolutely no interest in economics.

"In fact, Darwin asserted that there was no question humanity had achieved its current heights as a consequence of our rapid population growth and the subsequent race to survive. If human beings were to continue to evolve into still superior creatures, severe competition was an indispensable precondition. Although our natural rate of proliferation would lead to a great number of evils, it was not to be significantly reduced under any circumstances. The most superior specimens would be the most successful and produce the most descendents, and, Darwin argued, the race to survive should never be impaired by our laws or our customs. The seeds of social Darwinism, which would later come under attack for defending brutal industrial competition and society's class structure, were already germinating in Darwin's own theories." The old man took another mouthful of scotch.

"But, for the purposes of our discussion, the appeal of Darwinism was that it solved the philosophical enigma of animal suffering. Not only did it dispense with the issue of nature's senseless brutality, it celebrated brutality as the driving force in the evolutionary process. In the magnificent final chapter of *The Origin of the Species*, Darwin sums up his legitimization for the brutality of nature and the mercilessness of animals by saying that, 'From the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life.'"

Rei had read the entire book, but he had completely forgotten that such a passage existed in the final chapter.

That was the drawback to reading something half-heartedly for self-enrichment. The point wasn't to memorize the contents, but, of course it was far better to remember than to forget. Rei marveled at the mental abilities of his companion.

"Suffocating pessimism regarding nature's cruelty was one part of the Darwinist worldview, and this foreshadowed the theory's compatibility with the hunting hypothesis later on. In fact, of the explanations as to the origins of man that would be proposed, the hunting hypothesis was the first truly Darwinist theory. Strangely enough, Darwin himself had very little to say about the evolution of man. He divulged his own views briefly in a treatise published in 1871, but it was un-Darwinian in that it failed to address human traits as adaptations to something. Rather, Darwin held that man's domination over nature made human origins self-explanatory. In terms of his own theories, however, this was the equivalent of saying nothing. According to Darwin's ideas, human attributes would evolve and develop naturally in anthropoid primates, but, if all higher-apes had the propensity to evolve into human beings, why was it that the rest of the primates have remained apes? Clark filled in these blanks in *The Antecedents of Man: An Introduction to the Evolution of the Primates*. The reason other existing primates failed to evolve into human beings was that their ancestors developed specialized traits such as swinging through the trees, ending up at evolutionary dead ends. These digressive specializations caused them to deviate from the evolutionary path of man. In other words, apes missed out on becoming human

beings because they got distracted with other things. Surprisingly, from Darwin's time up until the first half of the twentieth century, most anthropologists agreed with Darwin's own un-Darwinian views. The most plausible idea by far, that human attributes were specialized traits adapted to man's unique mode of survival, was hardly discussed at all, save in a scant number of theoretical proposals. However, after winning the battle against competing theories such as reactionary Romanticist evolutionary theory and Mutationism, which was based on successes in genetic experimentation, anthropologists were forced to see that men, too, were the result of ordinary evolution. The origin of human beings' unique traits, like those of other animals, had developed through a process of adaptive change ... but there was another reason why this was good news for anthropologists."

"The holocaust," Gotouda said heavily.

"From Darwin's time until around the beginning of the second World War, most scientists who studied human evolution were shockingly racist by today's standards, believing that certain races were closer to the apes than others ... an actual inferior race. Unfortunately, this idea was based on an important Darwinian theory. Darwin had made consistent efforts to fill in the gap between humans and animals, and Huxley and various other specialists believed that inferior races and ignorant barbarians were the missing link between refined men and gorillas. Based on this same theory, the Nuremburg Law was passed, and Auschwitz and Dachau were built. The prominent German Darwinist Ernst Haeckel, the anthropologists who trained

in the Haeckel tradition and cooperated enthusiastically with the Nazis' ethnic cleansing plans, the natural anthropologists of English-speaking countries who were just as racist ... all of these parties possessed the same passion, pride, and confidence as the scholars who had vivisected animals, their consciences desensitized by a Cartesian anesthetic."

"Cranometry, eugenics, criminal anthropology ..."
Gotouda murmured.

"When people set on linking human abilities to biological determinism, it is almost impossible to protect academic objectivity from the encroaching cultures of prejudice and discrimination. These convictions didn't evaporate after World War II, but, in the shadow of Auschwitz, the racist ideas were no longer respected among intellectuals. After the war, anthropologists no longer found it possible to embrace racially hierarchical ideology. Rather, this type of thinking was shunned. People attempted to eradicate it altogether, but another problem emerged ... If anthropologists acknowledged the universality and equality of all men, they had to also acknowledge a clear separation between men and animals.

"The view that human culture, language, and history actually materialized without precedents or similarities in animals is actually strongly upheld by many anthropologists and linguists today. Leslie White asserts the uniqueness of human beings' symbolic behavior and rejects that there were any intermediary stages between humans and animals. Noam Chomsky has proposed that language emerged suddenly, as the result of a mysterious genetic mutation. Jawa Man and Peking Man are classified

as *Homo sapiens* while Neanderthal Man is classified as *Homo neanderthalensis*."

"We're all related, we're all friends. The ape-men are all one big family of brothers ... it's safer to make gorillas and orangutans our fossilized relatives than our friends," Gotouda said sarcastically.

Rei peered into Gotouda's face, thinking he might be drunk, but his eyes were the picture of sobriety.

"In 1947, when the *Australopithecus* fossil was discovered in the cave in Transvaal, questions regarding man's true form reemerged among anthropologists. Thus, the theory of human origin as relating to adaptation to hunting was welcomed for both political and scientific reasons. The hunting hypothesis proposed a major adaptive disparity between mankind and anthropoids, which satisfied both neo-Darwinists as well as other proponents of human equality."

The old man slowly drank the remaining liquid in his glass and leaned back in his chair.

His discourse on the line between man and animals had finally come full circle. It had been long—exhaustingly long—but Rei still had no inkling where it was leading. Quite honestly, the main impression he retained of the man's elaborate speech was that an incomprehensible amount of intellectual enthusiasm had been expended in order to cling to the idea that human beings were human.

"The hunting hypothesis drew a clearer line between man and animals than had previous explanations of human evolution. The harsh pessimism and misanthropy intrinsic to Dart's ideas drew their share of criticism and revulsion from anthropologists, but detractors are

still searching for another adaptive development to differentiate human beings from the higher apes. There is an ongoing agenda to define categories within nature and history that enable us to exempt humanity from nature's constraints and support the idea that human beings stand alone. Having large brains, walking upright on two legs, using language and tools ... the reason we want to think of these human attributes as unique and universal is that they have a mysterious importance as symbols of man's status. By characterizing these qualities as unique, we can justify man's dominance over animals. But by characterizing them as universal, we prevent them from being used to justify dominating other human beings. This precondition helps explain why biologists and sociologists become so disgruntled whenever it is shown that animals also possess human emotions, volition, or abilities. Dolphins have large brains, chimpanzees use tools, gorillas can use sign language, and dogs can understand their masters' speech ... animals that possess these human attributes make us uncomfortable, and, in order to dispel that discomfort, scientists have demonstrated great ingenuity in redefining these abilities. They've introduced mathematical functions to be used in comparing human brain size to that of animals. They've decided that it is syntax, not semantics, that characterizes a linguistic ability indicative of sentience and consciousness. Even scientists who believe that human beings are simply foolish animals don't like the idea that animals are stupid humans, and, while it is scientific to describe man in animal terms, those that attempt the opposite are criticized and shunned as being unscientific and anthropomorphic."

Suddenly, Rei was struck by the feeling that the animals depicted on the walls surrounding them were the true, intended audience for the old man's speech.

No, not an audience ... they were more like a listening gallery or jury. In that case, perhaps this place was a courtroom, and not the place of worship he had first imagined. If the room was a court, the human race was on trial, and it didn't seem likely that the old man was the lawyer for the defense.

The old man continued, his tone cool and unforgiving like a prosecutor delivering his final arguments.

"Our culture is fundamentally based around the practice of judging one thing as superior to another, and all manner of intellectual efforts have been made to justify these distinctions. No, we might as well call it discrimination. Man has been driven to a point where we are unable to establish cognitive distinctions between men and women, masters and slaves, white people and people of color, and, finally, men and animals. Thus, if human dignity is to be preserved, the nonhuman world can no longer be characterized simply and solely in terms of human gain. If we are to recognize Darwin's claim that there is no fundamental difference between men and the higher mammals in terms of mental faculty, we have to advocate for animal rights and extend human dignity to our voiceless relatives, granting a kind of personhood to animals in order to prevent people from being relegated to the status of mere beasts."

"Right back to square one ..." Gotouda muttered.

“In order to reconcile the two ideas—human superiority on the one side and universal sentience on the other—it was necessary to understand why animals should be respected as unique beings. But this was rendered impossible by the human inability to define man’s own existence, let alone give up exploitative habits such as meat-eating, wearing fur, and performing experiments on animals.”

The silent animals on the walls watched the old man fixedly so as not to miss a single word. Disoriented by this strange illusion, Rei waited to hear what the old man would say next.

“Man has exhausted the topic of human nature. The only result has been to make the discussion more difficult, and our hands are now too bloody to engage in a dialogue with animals.”

The old man’s tone was as dispassionate as ever. “Whenever men try to discuss their origins, a shadow of evil always lurks. Before its role as a scientific theory, the hunting hypothesis was first and foremost a fantastic creation myth that justified the vague line drawn between the realm of man and the unconscious kingdom of the animals. And, like all myths, this one was rooted in truth.”

“The existence of vampiric ape-men ...” Gotouda said, pressing for the conclusion.

“It is never easy to define cause-and-effect relationships when it comes to evolution. When the conclusion is that humans are unique, no explanation is possible. This is because, in order to explain something, you must provide various other examples to establish a familiar and profound general principle. But, as Hume pointed out long ago,

science is incapable of examining unique phenomena to which generalized patterns don't apply. The only evolutionary changes we can hope to explain are parallelisms—that is, the phenomenon of the emergence of multiple species with the same structural or adaptive purposes.”

The old man turned to Rei. “You are one of the rare few who has seen *them* twice. I wonder ... what did they remind you of?”

In the back of his mind, Rei conjured up the image of the monster he had seen just a few hours earlier. An enormous bat, a hideous naked rat ... both seemed at once somehow apt, but somehow slightly wrong, too.

“It looked like a human being, didn't it?”

Rei drew a sharp gasp and looked up.

What had it looked like? It had unquestionably looked like a human being. Its form had been at once human and inhuman. But, even above that, the impression Rei had gotten was one of a human being turned evil. No.

Of the evil of humanity itself.

The shock of this realization left Rei speechless.

Having fully observed the impact of his words, the old man looked away again and resumed speaking.

“If our ancestors were ape-men who adapted to hunting animals, and *they* evolved parallel to us, feeding off of our ancestors ... speaking scientifically, it's only natural that they would resemble us. They were like mirrors, faithfully reflecting our own evil image. When I said earlier that they were human, this is what I meant.”

The old man's voice was as soft as ever, but, for some reason, the voice sounded sad to Rei's ears. Or

perhaps Rei just wanted to think the old man was capable of feeling ...

"Is that why you go around killing them?" Gotouda asked, his voice indifferent but his face screwed into a look of deep pain that Rei had never before seen.

The old man didn't answer, but his silence was the most eloquent confirmation to Gotouda's question. The two men were alike in one sense: they were both disillusioned with the human race. Gotouda, who looked like nothing but a shabby middle-aged man, was one thing. But this old man had more knowledge and intelligence in one finger than Rei had in his entire body, and the fact that the conclusion of his long life consisted of pursuing and destroying man's mirror-image struck Rei as both cruelly tragic and horrifying.

"Why don't you make this information public? You have the corpses you've collected."

"Our work is not just to eliminate them; it's also to conceal their existence. Collecting their dead bodies is a higher priority even than killing them. Think about it. Dart's claims were a mere hypothesis based on meager evidence, and yet they drew tremendous criticism. Do you think anyone would be pleased if we showed them proof that the mirror-image of man is a hideous monster? Our societies are built on the fallacy that human beings, with all their flaws, are still fundamentally good. If we told people now that human beings have been evil ever since the evolution of anthropoids, that the sign of Cain is still engraved in our foreheads ... Don't misunderstand; my fear is not of being criticized nor of spreading panic.

I am more afraid of providing ethical grounds for human corruption”

“But the existence of those things is a true threat. They’ve already killed a number of people,” Rei protested, forgetting momentarily that this old man had been the person who had saved him from his own death.

“They rarely kill humans. Consider the fact that it’s an act of suicide for a parasite to kill its hosts. Moreover, as highly intelligent beings, they are not so inefficient as to select their targets indiscriminately. Since modern times, anyway, they’ve chosen to lurk in highly populated areas, ingeniously attaching themselves to small, insular groups and living off their members. We call these groups harems, but some call them hunting grounds or feeding grounds. The finer points of their blood-sucking system are still not clear, but it seems that their human hosts develop a strong psychological dependence on them. Not only do they willingly provide their own blood, they also recruit new subjects to the group as instructed. Sometimes these are friends or relatives.”

“Ah-ha! The ringleader and the followers,” Gotouda exclaimed. Rei remembered the look on Aoki’s face and the overpowering charisma of the man who had called himself Kariya.

“In practical terms, like most organisms with long lifespans, they have very low reproductive rates, and their actual numbers don’t even compare to those of humans. You could call them a rare species. In biological terms, their threat to the human race is far less than that of influenza, and far greater than that of the great white shark. Like

the vampires of legend, their only real threat is the ethical crisis they present to human beings. As I mentioned earlier, this instance of a vampire devouring his entire harem is rare. It's probably a sort of warning to us, for having heedlessly drawn too close. We've only just begun our operations in this country."

"He ... the one who escaped ... he was trying to find out what we knew."

"This is a war between us and them, and for them it's a battle to survive. We can't expect an unchallenged victory, like the one over the passenger pigeon or the dodo. They're mentally equal if not superior to us, and, when it comes to physical abilities—"

"The most powerful primates in history, right? And, in a pinch, they use their wings and glide away," Gotouda joked.

The old man responded, trying to regain control of the conversation by saying, "That concludes my story. Now it's your turn."

Rei felt as if these mild words concealed something sharper, and he straightened his back.

"I'm well aware of the story behind how you—that is, the young man and his friends—came to interfere with our operations. It was an unfortunate coincidence that the sole witness of our collection of that body happened to be a friend of a follower. We did everything we could to discourage you from persisting—"

"You were the ones who had Doigaki and Amano arrested and got us in trouble!" This was just as Rei had expected, but, when his suspicions were confirmed, a flood of indignation welled up in his chest.

“They were taken into custody, rather. I don’t deny that it was meant as a warning, but it was also a measure to ensure your friends’ safety.”

The man seemed unperturbed by Rei’s ire. He turned to Gotouda and continued. “The problem was that someone was agitating the youngsters and sniffing around our operations ... I want to know exactly who you are and how much you know about us.”

“I’m just a humble civil servant.”

“According to my sources, there is nobody by the name of Gotouda working for the Tokyo Police, First Investigation Division of the Department of Criminal Investigations.”

“O-ho! Cat’s out of the bag!”

Rei turned and stared in surprise as Gotouda twisted his mouth and let out his patented hyena-like laugh.

SIX

Rei had sensed that Gotouda was too outrageous to be a detective; that is to say, his behavior was too inappropriate. But Gotouda's casual confession made Rei's stomach churn. The idea of working with a cop was already against his principles. If this man wasn't even a cop, who on earth had they been collaborating with? If Rei didn't find out, he wouldn't be able to look Shibano or Nabeta in the eyes again, let alone the incarcerated Doigaki and Amano.

Immediately, all sorts of possibilities sprang to mind, from that of a journalist or scholar to that of a CIA or KGB agent. Frustratingly, none of these images seemed to fit the middle-aged man sitting in front of him.

"Who are you?" Rei repeated the question he had asked the first time he had met Gotouda. "Why did you use us? ANSWER!" he demanded, stealing the floor from the old man. Still, neither the old man nor Gotouda showed any reaction to this outburst.

"You certainly haven't been stingy with your explanation ... I guess I'll talk, on the condition that you let the boy go," Gotouda answered the old man in his usual insolent style. "Antiestablishment activism aside,

he's really just a cocky teenager with a talent for inductive reasoning. He's an insolent brat with no respect for his elders, but he's not stupid enough to throw his life away by printing up handbills of what you've told us and distributing them in front of the train station. What do you have to lose by letting him go now?"

"WHAT!?" Rei shouted, leaping to his feet, but neither Gotouda nor the old man so much as glanced in his direction. Rei hovered in space, fuming, in the middle of the two men's face-off, but he had no choice but to return to his seat. He was being completely ignored.

"That'll have to wait and see if I'm satisfied with the results of our conversation. As I said at the beginning, we prefer to avoid needless bloodshed."

"But if it's not needless, no problem, right?"

"Think what you will." The old man stood his ground.

"All right. I guess I'm in no position to make demands."

"I take it you've changed your mind, then?"

"I've changed it ..." Gotouda replied, gazing at the old man. "I changed it just now."

Rei poured a large quantity of scotch into his own glass. He needed a drink when he thought about the fact that his life was riding on this middle-aged man, and he had nothing else to do other than drink and listen to what Gotouda had to say.

The scotch tasted flavorless when he realized it might be his last.

"In nineteenth century Europe, there was a Jew in Frankfurt who ran a small-time antique shop and money-lending business. After a great deal of toil, the man and

his five sons were able to rise up out of the financial realm, founding a world-class conglomerate with the power to manipulate international politics.”

Apparently, the conversation was moving from anthropology into economics.

Rei cursed his misfortune at being forced to undergo such a quantity of intensive discussion. Both of these men were deeply learned and seemed to know no exhaustion.

“They named their business after the family crest that had been passed down in their line for generations—that of a red shield—and the man took on the moniker as his family name. In French, it was pronounced *bouclier rouge*; in German, *rotes schild* ... and in English, they were called the Rothschilds.”

The old man had been listening in silence, but now the corners of his mouth twisted up ever so slightly, and his gaze, focused on Gotouda, took on a new gleam.

Gotouda took the man’s stare squarely and continued his story.

“It all started with a postal organization that was modeled after the relay communications network put into place by the Holy Roman Empire before it was dissolved by the Napoleonic Wars. Through financial support of the Thurn and Taxis families, the heritors of the system, it is said that the Rothschilds gained the right of free passage throughout the Empire. In fact, they completely overhauled the system. They employed high-speed boats and racehorses, carrier pigeons, and even Yiddish-based codes, tearing around Europe in their special horse-drawn carts with double floors, flying a blue and yellow flag that

came to be known as the Rothschild Colors. Their business continued to expand as they took on foreign-bill discounting and foreign loans, cotton textile imports, and so forth. Meanwhile, they took advantage of their information network to invest their profits in stocks and bonds. With the establishment of a vast, high-speed information network and the cultivation of specialists to maintain it, at the dawn of the nineteenth century they had already established a modern, global financial system that operated through a multinational corporation, which they leveraged skillfully and absolutely."

Gotouda paused. "Cigarette?" he prompted Rei laconically.

Rei lit him a Long Peace and Gotouda sucked on it with relish.

Like Rei and the old man, Gotouda clearly liked to talk, and his face was lit up for the first time since they had entered the room.

"This family's story is part and parcel of modern European history. Under the rule of Napoleon, they exploited the continental blockade and made a killing smuggling in English goods. The family's network functioned both as a communications web and a lifeline of the anti-Napoleonic front. They advanced funds to help nations of the anti-Napoleonic struggle, and their ingenious methods of channeling capital to the Duke of Wellington was the stuff of adventure movies. The family's behind-the-scenes efforts to unseat Napoleon were Herculean, but, of course, they didn't forget their business interests. During the battle of Waterloo, when Napoleon's fate was at stake, they

deliberately caused national bonds to crash in the London market, and then they bought them all up, amassing a large fortune. After the war, when the war reparations to be paid by the former regime were decided at the Aachen Peace Conference, they scored another victory by causing the French bond market to collapse in an act of rebellion against the old regime, which was plotting the demise of the new one. Despite their Jewish religion, they secured a stronghold as bankers to the Holy Alliance, controlling the purse strings of the Hapsburg family. It was later that their business practices would be reviled as Metternichian usury and reactionary coffers.

“The family’s enterprises go on and on. They colluded with the Viennese administration, issuing bonds to prop up state industries as their central business. In 1930 when the Viennese government was challenged after the July Revolution in France and Metternich staged a war of intervention, the Rothschilds recognized the danger of an ensuing national bond crisis. They refused to issue war bonds and again wielded influence through their information network, successfully quelling the threat. The family’s financial clout was already great enough to sway wars, revolutions, and the tides of European history. But this was where their winning streak ended. The Viennese government fell, and, as the nation-state movement gained momentum, the family’s godlike power began to decline. The multinational, ultranationalist enterprises, and the inviolable sovereignty of nation-states threw a wrench in their works. Family branches were reduced to operating independently within their resident nations and were

forced to issue national bonds in order to secure colonial interests. The London Rothschilds became directly involved with the British imperialist movement, the Paris Rothschilds supported France's rampant colonialism, and the family cleansed themselves of their reputation for being usurious imperialists. As nation-states emerged in rapid succession, the Rothschilds were hard-pressed to maintain their fortunes in the face of the significant risk of issuing bonds during times of war, the loss of their information monopoly through the evolution of other communications networks, and the establishment of tax systems—especially the British system with its massive inheritance tax. In the face of the changing tides of history, the family's crisis management skills took a major hit, and the emergence of Nazi Germany dealt them a final blow that would permanently cripple their legacy. The family branches in Naples, Frankfurt, and Vienna fell to ruin, leaving only those in London and Paris.

“Although it has been weakened, the family line is still alive and healthy today. Its diverse enterprises span gold, diamonds, leisure industries, and, of course, international finance. They even own a distillery in Vienna. The Paris Rothschilds are famous for a red Bordeaux—a Lafitte known as a *premier cru*, no less—and the London Rothschilds are famous for their Mouton.”

Rei hadn't understood why the old man had listened in silence to Gotouda's account of the rise and fall of the Rothschilds, but it all came together when he heard the word Lafitte.

So, Gotouda *had* been bluffing earlier when he'd pretended to know wines.

“There are endless anecdotes about the Rothschilds. One tells how they supported Howard Carter’s excavation of the tomb of Tutankhamen through the wife of Lord Caernarvon, Carter’s sponsor.”

“A most entertaining family, indeed. Now, if you wouldn’t mind getting to the point ...” the old man said, applying mild pressure.

“The Rothschild family had an odd custom—they practiced a great deal of intrafamilial marriage. This stemmed from the dying decree of Mayer, the father who first established the family’s unity, from the unique patriarchal system of the Rothschild Jews. Originally, the intermarriages were probably used to prevent the family fortune from dissipation. Of the eighteen marriages made by Mayer Rothschild’s grandchildren, sixteen were between first cousins. The families tended to be small and there were many eccentrics. This has been attributed to inbreeding, but that isn’t the point. What’s interesting is that almost every member of the family had a penchant for collecting, and, coupled with their financial power, this made the Rothschilds world-class collectors. A Rothschild named Walter, of the London branch of the family, was an avid gardener with a passion for orchids, rhododendrons, and azaleas. He was the creator of the vast Exbury Gardens. He spared no expense, dispatching plant buyers to destinations all over the world, including the Americas, China, Japan, India, and Nepal. The plants he collected were maintained in thirty greenhouses by two hundred gardeners, and they bred 1,200 new plant species. His grandson, another Walter, had a passion for animals, and he built the largest

natural history museum in the world. Its taxidermy exhibition displayed some two thousand mammals, 2,400 birds, and 680 reptiles. The shelves of its laboratory additionally housed the pelts and skeletons of 1,400 mammals, the skins of three hundred thousand birds, twenty thousand bird eggs, 2.25 million insect specimens, and three hundred thousand beetles. Beyond that, they had sold 295,000 stuffed birds to American museums. Walter's younger brother, Charles, shared his brother's devotion to natural history. He was a pioneer of environmentalism and was the founder of the British Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves. His eldest daughter, Miriam, was also a natural history scholar."

"And?"

"Their collecting was beyond the scope of mere dilettantism. Even as the hobby of the very wealthy, don't you find it a little extreme?"

"I'm not surprised that you find it strange, but, in many ways, the money and passion that the Europeans poured into their hobbies helped to develop the arts and sciences. Even if at times this might have had an aspect of the bizarre, as in the case of mad king Friedrich."

"Even so ... this part is my own theory ..."

Gotouda prefaced his next comments. "Did the specialists they dispatched all over the globe really just bring back rare plants and animals? I'm not referring to information on politics and economics for their business enterprises, either."

"Why don't you just say what you mean?" the old man pressed again.

Gotouda lowered his voice. "They brought back all manner of things—roots, seeds, birds' eggs, animal and insect remains, fossils and stone implements, and other precious archaeological artifacts. Which leads me to speculate—perhaps they also brought back a human being."

"... Interesting," the old man murmured, staring Gotouda straight in the face. "A truly fascinating proposition, but do you have any concrete evidence?"

"I told you, it's just a theory," Gotouda responded with an unpleasant grin. "However, I don't know if this qualifies as evidence, but here's another interesting fact ... you're familiar with a man named Morris?"

"I know of a Morris."

"That's the one. The one who caused the division of the Paris Rothschilds ... the one they call the black sheep of the family." Gotouda stuck his hand out toward Rei, making a scissoring motion with his first two fingers. "Second son of the dignified Baron Edmond, who supported the settlement of Israel, he was an uncontrollable playboy and a thorn in the entire family's side. He returned from his service in the First World War and attempted a career as a politician. Without permission, he used the family name to raise funds, which he then invested in real estate. When this came to light, he was banished ... disinherited, that is. After that, he spent much of his time skulking around Geneva, Switzerland—a lone wolf. Ironically, the business he had invested in was a great success, relatives with no heirs left him vast quantities of money, and, before long, he was the richest member of the entire family. He died in 1957, and his assets were left to his only son, as

well as a number of foundations. The question was, what did this legacy include?"

Gotouda's fingers, which had been fiddling with his cigarette, fell still. "Family secrecy was so tight that their motto could have been 'keep mum.' Until 1918, the document was prohibited from being publicized, but somehow or other the list of Morris's assets fell into the hands of a certain researcher. At the very end of this lengthy document, this is what was inscribed."

Gotouda put his cigarette in his mouth and stuck his free hand into his glass. With his wet fingers, he drew letters on the tabletop, and Rei leaned forward and followed them with his eyes.

They read: S ... A ... Y ... A ...

When he had grasped what this meant, Rei looked up at Gotouda and then at the old man.

Gotouda lit his cigarette and exhaled puffs of violet smoke.

The old man was gazing at him with an expression completely devoid of emotion.

"... Who are you?" he asked in a whisper.

"The researcher searched high and low to find out what SAYA meant ... and then died a sudden death. They said it was a traffic accident."

"Who on earth are you?" The old man asked again.

"I told you, I'm a civil servant. But not an employee of the local authorities. I'm a public employee of the smallest nation on earth."

The old man's brow had been furrowed, but now his face twisted slowly into an expression of utter shock.

It was a stunning transformation in a man who had until now been the very picture of erudition.

“Ridiculous! Why would the Vatican interfere with this matter?”

When the word Vatican came out of the man’s mouth, Rei was immediately struck by an overwhelming feeling that something was wrong.

The story of the family who had manipulated European history from behind the scenes meshed cleanly with the impression he had of the old man sitting in front of him, and, more than anything, the strange room they were in seemed appropriate to a family that had produced a long succession of collectors and natural history scholars. But, when it came to Gotouda, the image of the Vatican seemed impossibly removed from that of the middle-aged man who had smoked cheap cigarettes while consuming beer and *kimchi* at the budget Korean barbecue joint—who even now was bumming smokes off Rei. Rei would sooner have taken him for a sorcerer of a Japanese strain of Voodoo than for a devout Catholic.

But Gotouda didn’t deny the old man’s words. He just sat there smoking in his characteristically impertinent manner.

“Don’t forget, now—ever since Pope Gregory IX began the Papal Inquisition in 1231, Rome can be said to have exclusive rights in this matter. I quote—‘these monsters must be wiped off the face of the earth, regardless of age or sex. They have clearly made a pact with Lucifer, the Lord of Darkness, and they are polluting the continents. It is every Christian’s duty to persecute these heretics.’”

“And,” the old man interjected, “as I’m sure you haven’t forgotten, ever since Rome declared this monopoly, the Holy See has taken every opportunity to spread the dogma of its religious intolerance. Freedom and truth were irreconcilable. Truth, whenever possible, was based on church teachings, and was never to be asserted by the state. They considered intolerance to be the highest virtue.” The old man had recovered from his brief astonishment and his eyes had recovered their strong-willed gleam.

“In this spirit of intolerance they would violate the basic rights of Catholics and non-Catholics alike, and, to this end, they resolutely embarked on a path of violence. In order to accomplish this, Rome needed a small number of ruthless groups to conduct, in the name of the pope, the cruelest assault on human dignity in history. This vanguard of papal terror was the inquisitors.” The old man spat the word out vehemently, staring Gotouda straight in the face.

“Their self-imposed policy was simple—better to kill a hundred innocent people than to let one heretic escape. Like the pope, the inquisitors were incapable of erring or doing wrong. They ruled with inviolable and absolute authority. After Pope Innocent IV’s decree allowing the use of torture, it isn’t hard to imagine the terror that was wrought by the forces of justice. They conducted their holy work passionately, and their weapons were jealousy, envy, hatred, and every other evil that lurks in the heart of man, which also provided the basis for informing and bearing false witness. Blasphemy, sacrilege, sorcery, bestiality, default of church taxes, reading the bible, and withdrawing from the community were all acts of heresy

punishable by death, and these minions of Satan were deployed everywhere. Nobody ever saw them, but the fact that they were unseen made them an infinite threat. Moreover, they didn't just threaten the living. Because the church had the power to excommunicate the dead, inquisitors would desecrate graves, try the corpses, and burn them. If someone's remains couldn't be found, an effigy would be tried. This isn't just a story of unenlightened medieval times—the barbaric practices of Rome's Inquisition were carried on openly well into the nineteenth century. In Spain, the Inquisition officially ended in 1813, but trials continued for almost twenty more years. While burning people to death was outlawed, in 1856 Pope Pious IX issued a papal decree approving the practices of excommunication, banishment, lifelong imprisonment, and secret executions. Inquisitors never suffered defeat, but they never achieved the ultimate victory either. This is because the enemy they were supposedly eradicating grew larger through inquisitions and terror, their methods of eradication."

The evidence of the cruelty and intolerance of human beings toward their fellow man, like that they inflict on animals, served as additional charges against the human race in the old man's closing argument.

"The activities of the inquisitors affected not only human beings but also the literary world. In 1571, Rome's Congregation of the Index was established, and for several centuries it continued to release periodically revised lists of banned books. Incredibly, the index wasn't banned until the time of Paul VI, four centuries later, in 1966—just three years ago! Rome has always preferred

to handle controversy not through discourse, but by eradicating it at the source.”

The old man’s closing arguments showed no signs of winding down; in fact, he seemed to be only picking up speed. Rei was filled with horror by the sheer quantity of anger that lurked behind the old man’s intelligent gaze and mild expression.

“For more than six centuries, Rome was the enemy of fundamental human justice, but the greatest crime they conducted in this century was the persecution of the Jews.”

The old man’s eyes took on a look of hatred for the first time.

“In 1555, Paul IV penned a decree that was to be a watershed document in the history of anti-Semitism. Since then, the papal dynasty has progressively strengthened its prejudice toward the Jewish tradition. Pius VII, Leo XII, Pius XIII, Gregory XVI, and Pius IX all made Paul IV’s anti-Semitism pale in comparison. It was the Vatican that ordered Jews be confined to certain zones, and it is clear that when the Nazis continued this policy, naming these zones ghettos, they did so in the interest of continuity with Papal history, following suit with a practice that had become a kind of tradition. There is no mistaking the similarities between the decrees of Innocent III and Paul IV and the Nazis’ Nuremburg Laws. As the lowest class of society, polluters of the continent, and the race who had murdered Jesus, Jewish homes, land, and cemeteries were confiscated. They were forcibly moved, detained, and murdered en masse. The practice of tacitly approving fascist ethnic-persecution was begun in 1932, when Pius

XII was elected. In 1942, the Archbishop of Canterbury represented himself, the Church of England, and the non-Anglican Communion in condemning the Nazis' mass slaughter of the Jews, but the successors of St. Peter remained silent ..."

The cigarette in Gotouda's hand had built up a long tail of ash, which now fell, dirtying the fancy, wooden, inlaid floor.

"There was only one man in the world whose word Hitler feared. This was because there were many Catholics in his armies. But this man never said a word. During World War II, one of the leaders of the hopeless rebel-movement in Warsaw screamed the following lamentation of the indifference of world leaders—'The world is silent. The world *knows*, it is inconceivable that it should not, and stays silent. God's vicar in the Vatican is silent.'"

The old man concluded his speech as if to criticize Gotouda, who listened without protesting. "Why were they silent? Because inquisitors do not tolerate any resistance from their victims."

"These inquisitors you speak of no longer exist," Gotouda said. "In 1908, the oldest religious court in Rome became the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, and its prison became a records office. Four years ago it was renamed the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith."

"Like the Soviet secret police, no matter how many times they change their name, their activities are fundamentally unchanged," the old man countered. "Perhaps the acts of brutality are less prominent, but

their mission remains the same, and their leader—the Grand Inquisitor—remains the current pope.”

“It’s true that many popes have made shocking mistakes,” Gotouda replied. “And the Vatican has never once acknowledged them. That is a fact. But the family you serve has dirtied its hands, too. I’m not referring to their ruthless business dealings ... I’m talking about the girl. Saya.”

The old man narrowed his eyes and looked prob- ingly at Gotouda.

“You’ve given us a long account of the origins of these monsters and the ethical dangers they present. But you left out one important thing.” Gotouda’s cigarette was down to the filter, and he stubbed it out in the ashtray. “Throughout history, various methods have been used to search out vampires—sprinkling ashes on a grave and looking for footprints, digging up graves whose crosses were bent, making horses walk across graves on the premise that animals could detect vampires ... But, if you ask me, the best way to find vampires is to ask a vampire.”

“... Oh my God.”

In fact, Rei had harbored this suspicion himself.

Saya’s animal-like eyes—Abe had used the word evil to describe them—were befitting of a creature that preyed upon human beings. Perhaps the reason Rei had been unable to voice this doubt was his unwillingness to accept that the girl possessed the capacity to transform into one of those horrendous monsters.

“If I’m not mistaken, that girl has their blood. She’s vampire kin.”

“Kin ...?”

“In plain language, she’s a hybrid of a vampire and a human. And I imagine that she’s a subspecies that was artificially engineered. This idea isn’t without grounds—almost every plant and animal collector is also a breeder who seeks to engineer new species. As I mentioned before, the Rothschild line included a horticulturalist who created more than a thousand plant species, and the Paris and London branches of the family were some of the eminent European horse breeders, producing countless famous thoroughbreds.”

“Back then, there was only one way to prove that they belonged to the same genus as us—that they, too, were human ...” the old man said, breaking the silence he had kept since the conversation had turned to Saya.

“Crossbreeding. That’s what you’re saying.”

When Gotouda said the word crossbreeding, a strong wave of nausea made Rei grimace.

“She was the one success of several attempts. As I mentioned, they have a low fertility rate and tend to produce few offspring. The other pregnancies resulted in miscarriages and stillborns, but, miraculously, she alone survived. She grew up secretly, human in form, but with their terrible abilities and lifespan. Those who were involved with the project referred to her as the cursed jewel.”

Rei thought he detected a note of deep regret in the old man’s voice, but, again, it might just have been wishful thinking.

If something in Saya’s eyes had captivated Rei, it was the violent rage that lurked behind the evil. If this stemmed from an abhorrence of her own blood, that would explain it.

"A cursed jewel ... I can't imagine why she lets you people live."

"Oh, she despises us ... at least since the day she learned what she was. The only reason she stays with us is that she needs our help to annihilate them. She'll never forgive the creatures whose blood she shares, nor will she forgive the accursed human race."

Gotouda's response was soft but resolute. "I doubt the Vatican will forgive it either. Especially not you, her creators. Satan seeks to desecrate the sexual organs in order to desecrate mankind. Original sin is passed down to subsequent generations only through sex. That sin will never be forgiven."

The old man and Gotouda stared at each other in silence.

Between them stood a history of grisly strife, the extent of which Rei found unfathomable. It was a battle between two sides that had both perpetrated unforgivable crimes, accusing one another of committing acts that were even more unforgivable. It seemed to Rei that the standoff might last forever ...

The old man spoke first.

"It appears that our discussion has been fruitless ..."

The words were a death sentence to Rei, and a cold chill ran through his body. Despite himself, he had become completely wrapped up in the conversation. Why should he have to die over events that had taken place long before he was born? Just as he was searching frantically for an answer, the old man said something unexpected.

"I seem to have overdone it a bit. Please excuse me. I'll have them escort you back."

Wordlessly, Gotouda rose to his feet.

Bewildered by this unexpected turn of events, Rei followed suit.

He turned and headed for the door, bathed in a cold sweat. The old man called after him.

"I have a message for ... Rei, was it? From Saya. She says that if she sees you again, she'll kill you."

For a moment, Rei's step lurched as if someone had stabbed him from behind—but somehow he managed to make it out the door with Gotouda.

When he looked back, the old man was sitting motionless as before, his head slightly inclined.

Surrounded by animals, he looked just like a zoological specimen of a human being.

— BATTLE —

ONE

Rei went back to school. Amano and Doigaki, who had been supposedly arrested for a traffic violation and the obstruction of an officer in the line of duty, were exempt from trial and set free, as expected. Like Rei, they received a three-week suspension from school, and were being held prisoner in their homes. Shibano and Nabeta began a movement to protest the suspensions, but the indisputable fact that the pair had been arrested for the apolitical act of riding double on a one-person motorbike worked against them, and, in the end, the protest petered out without ever creating much of a stir.

An unknown party had called an ambulance and Aoki had been transported to the hospital. The heavy injuries he sustained—several broken ribs and a smashed collarbone—would require two months of hospitalization, but he was doing well enough that he was able to undergo police questioning in his hospital room. According to Shibano, who had gone to visit, Aoki seemed completely transformed. It was like he'd been freed of an evil spirit. Aside from the fact that he couldn't remember the last two months very clearly, he was recovering steadily.

The fracas in the barricaded building at M University had left twenty injured and was billed in the media as a dramatic internecine clash between rival sects, but, after the SR Faction essentially fell apart afterwards, the stories drew to a close without the attackers ever having been identified.

When Rei went back to school, his greatest fear was to come face to face with Saya again. But, as he had half-anticipated, she disappeared completely after that day. According to the other students, her homeroom teacher had simply announced that she had transferred to another school. Nobody knew where she had gone or why.

As for Gotouda, Rei hadn't seen him since the night they met with the old man, after the two foreigners had dropped them off at Shinjuku Station before dawn.

Seeing as communications had been unilaterally severed by Gotouda, Shibano declared their collaboration over. As Saya's transfer and the dissolution of the SR Faction meant that Aoki was no longer in personal danger, he also announced the end of their investigation. With the subject of the investigation absent, there was really nothing for Rei and the others to do, but they had lost interest anyway.

The political factions and citizen groups that had immediately declared a strategic victory after the last unified movement had already begun preparations for the next one. But, with three of its six members having been arrested and one sustaining serious injuries, Rei's clique was burned out. Rei's own wrongful detainment aside, Shibano and the others had been severely disheartened by the fact that, after finally agreeing to collude with a

police officer and beginning an investigation, the boys had still been unable to discern why Doigaki and Amano had been arrested, let alone who the enemy had been. The only conclusion that had resulted had been Aoki's hospitalization.

Rei knew the truth, but, because he had lacked the courage to come clean at the very beginning, he was now saddled with an even bigger secret. It was an exhausting burden to bear.

But he kept quiet.

The mere fact that Gotouda—who hadn't even looked like a detective—was actually an inquisitor working for the Vatican was in itself hard to believe. Add to that the fact that the men behind Saya were backed by a Jewish conglomerate that had manipulated the flow of European history, that the targets they were pursuing were vampires descended from blood-sucking ape-men, and that one of these had metamorphosed before Rei's very eyes and glided off of a building ... who on earth would believe a story like that? If the shoe were on the other foot, Rei knew that he himself would have trouble swallowing such a fantastic account.

But there was something else that troubled Rei.

Shibano cursed Gotouda, vowing revenge in blood and calling him a traitor, an opportunist, a Machiavellian who had taken advantage of them, and a dog of the authorities. To an extent, this was all true.

Gotouda had clearly known that Aoki was a follower of Kariya, and that Saya's target had been Kariya himself and not Aoki. He had known, and yet he had manipulated Rei and the others, deploying them between the two parties

and then monitoring the setup to see what developments would ensue. As expected, Kariya had been provoked by the emergence of the third-party actors and had used Aoki to trap Rei. The fact that Gotouda had followed Rei, tailing him right up to the barricade at M University, was the ultimate proof.

But Gotouda hadn't been the only one using them. Saya had attacked the barricade just as Rei fell into Kariya's trap. This was no coincidence. Saya's team, too, had deliberately elevated the sense of crisis by having Doigaki and Amano arrested. They had waited for Rei to take the dangerous leap into Kariya's trap, and they had been following him, too. Perhaps they had already determined that the SR Faction stronghold was a vampire nest, but this had been the only way for them to ensure Kariya's capture.

In other words, both Gotouda and Saya's sides had taken full advantage of Rei's group ... and Rei's group had played the perfect patsies, flailing about in a complete panic. From where Gotouda and Saya's group stood, it must have been a great joke—an investigation leveraged by the solidarity and familial angst of a group of pathetic teenaged activists. When the mission was complete and Rei's group had served their purpose, it was as if they had never existed.

The ultimate symbol of this was when Rei had hovered in space between the two clashing foes, eliciting about as much concern from them as a speck of dust.

No matter what pretensions Rei and his friends assumed, in the end they were a group of stupid high school kids playing the fools, and, before they knew it, the clever

players had withdrawn, leaving them with only injuries and arrests to show for their pains. Suckers. The stupidity of it frustrated Rei most of all. He found the whole thing almost cripplingly depressing.

The nonpartisans of Tokyo K High School were completely sunk. When word got out, the teachers alone had something to smile about.

He shouldn't let it end like this. No; it *couldn't* end like this. As he racked up a perfect school attendance record, Rei was secretly plagued by a sense of resentment and desperation.

Of course, it wasn't over. That day, after coming directly home after school, Rei found a message from his mother taped to his door. It read as follows:

K Bookstore called.

Beneath the Octagonal Tower by Ei'ichi Kariya, ¥2200

Out of print; last available copy

If you fail to come for it, we will sell it to the next customer on the waiting list.

TWO

The octagonal tower was said to have been the symbol of Tokyo K High School since the era when it had been a prefectural junior high.

In fact, it wasn't a tower at all but merely a domed ceiling that capped the third-floor lobby of the old school-building. But, from a distance, the structure that protruded from the top of the roof did resemble an old-fashioned minaret. For some reason, the architect had seen fit to execute the structure in hideous reinforced concrete; nonetheless, it was in a state of advanced disrepair, and the students were forbidden to lean against it for fear that it would collapse. Ignoring the warnings, Rei and his buddies made a habit of kicking it, sometimes even scaling the walls of the decrepit symbol of authority.

Rei crouched next to the octagonal tower and gazed out over the rooftop.

The roof of the old school building made a right-angle turn at the partitioned area of the tower. From where Rei was, all he could see was the triangular shadow of the rooftop structure that contained the exit staircase, off to his right.

A bluish moon glimmered behind a thin veil of clouds.

Rei was completely unarmed. He'd debated bringing an iron pipe or a two-by-four, but he knew they'd be useless against the monster. Besides, Saya was bound to appear. Against her sword, an iron pipe would offer about as much protection as a feather.

He was just the bait, and he knew it.

By summoning Rei, Kariya was really sending a challenge to Saya. Saya understood this and would accept the invitation. If neither of them knew the other's current whereabouts, their only means of staging an encounter was to use Rei as a chip.

All he could do was wait.

Of course, he had thought about running away. But the part in the message about Kariya choosing the next in the group if Rei failed to come made Rei hesitate. He understood the situation, but it would have been unthinkable to endanger Shibano or Nabeta, who still knew nothing. Besides ... he knew that it was impossible for him to escape from this.

That being the case, he wanted to end it once and for all. Here. Tonight.

Doubtlessly the two enemies had been battling secretly for some time now. If they wanted to finally settle the score, the only way for Rei to wash his hands of the matter was to come here tonight. He couldn't claim not to be terrified, but he also felt that this was the only way for the stupid teenager who had been their pawn to make a stand.

There was one other thing ... this was his last chance to see Saya again.

When this thought occurred to him, Rei was overcome with an emotion that he himself couldn't explain.

The swordplay he had seen Saya display behind the barricade had been truly godlike—or perhaps the word demonic was more appropriate—and yet Kariya had dodged her blade by a hair. Even if Saya did fell Kariya, it was gravely uncertain whether or not she would let Rei live.

So why did he want to see her again?

Perhaps he was doing something insanely stupid. Just as he was pondering that possibility, a figure emerged from the stairwell and greeted him.

“Heya.”

It was the man Rei had anticipated might appear, and, at the same time, Rei also anticipated that he’d be of absolutely no help.

“You showed up! I’m quite impressed,” Gotouda said in a casual tone as he approached, his coat balled up under one arm.

“Oh, you’re impressed, huh? As if you weren’t tailing me this entire time.”

“I was a little concerned that you might shut yourself up in your room and pretend to be dead again.”

“What’s that?” Rei jerked his chin toward Gotouda’s coat.

Gotouda opened it up and showed Rei the menacing weapon inside. It was a shotgun. Not the kind used for hunting, but a genuine pump-action riot gun like the ones Rei always saw in American movies.

“Where on earth did you—” Rei gasped in amazement as he stared at the lethal object. He had expected that Gotouda would carry a gun when showing up for a potential bloodbath, but he had never imagined anything of this magnitude.

"I thought it was your policy to avoid guns whenever possible."

"Whenever possible. But I do value my life, and I'm not brazen enough to show up unarmed. A Remington with 00B rounds might not cut it, but I'm not about to go running around carrying a machine gun, either."

He grasped the slide, moving his palm lightly up and down. The gun made an ominous sound as he loaded it. He showed Rei the tube-shaped magazine loaded with additional shells in his pocket. Rei could see that he was used to handling the weapon.

"Are you really a Christian?"

Gotouda smirked. "Setting aside the question of whether or not I subscribe to Christian beliefs ... have you ever seen the Vatican's Swiss Guard?"

"I've seen pictures. Those guys with the uniforms that look like circus costumes, right?"

"They might look like the circus on the outside, but they're professional soldiers on the inside. Underneath the showy dress, they're concealing military pistols. Paul VI banned them from wearing any badges of rank or openly carrying weapons, but the Vatican has never abolished the practice of carrying arms. This shotgun is just a sweet little thing. Even now, there's a place in Saint Peter's Basilica where loaded machine guns are kept at the ready, just in case."

Gotouda reached under his shabby suit with his free hand, pulled out an automatic handgun, and handed it to Rei. "It's up to you to defend yourself. Have you ever shot one of these?"

"What do you think?" Rei answered, holding the heavy pistol gingerly in his hands. He knew a little bit about guns, and he recognized this as a Colt Government M1911A1.

"Will this work against that monster?"

"Look inside the magazine."

Rei obeyed, pulling the magazine out of the gun's stock. It was loaded with .45-caliber bullets. The flat, lead-colored slugs were packed together tightly.

"No golden bullets?"

"Unfortunately not. Those are hollow points. They're designed to expand in the body instead of piercing it all the way through. As long as you hit your target, you could even stop a raging mountain gorilla in its tracks."

"But we're talking about the most powerful primate in history."

"Just worry about hitting him, okay? Put the magazine back in and load the gun."

Rei returned the magazine to the stock. He pulled and released the slide once, as he'd seen it done in the movies. It made a wonderful noise as the chamber closed. The cocked hammer gave him an eerie feeling. His fear was far greater than his will to fight.

"Hold it gently with both hands and keep your wrists relaxed."

Rei did as he was told.

"Reach your arms out in front of you, elbows slightly bent. Don't tilt your head. Open both eyes. Don't draw your hips back. Look at the foresight only, not the hindsight. Relax your shoulders and use only your right index finger to pull the trigger. I said, relax your shoulders! What are you, a gorilla?"

"I've never held one before! Will you quit hassling me?" Rei shouted, flustered. The clarity he had had a few minutes earlier was completely shattered.

"Never mind. I'm sure aiming won't help you hit anything anyway. In any case, if he comes after you, just squeeze the trigger and let 'er rip," Gotouda said carelessly, abandoning the role of the serious coach. He must have figured it was pointless.

Rei clutched the safety in his right hand, holding the hammer back with his left. Gingerly, he pulled the trigger and then slowly let the hammer down. He lowered the gun and wiped the streaming sweat from his brow.

He didn't dislike guns. In fact, he was quite fond of them. But he had never in his wildest dreams imagined that he might shoot one in a situation like this.

"I just realized something," Rei said to Gotouda.

"What?"

"Is it okay to be firing this thing here?"

Even though it was night—no, especially because it was night—he didn't imagine that shooting guns at a school would be tolerated. "We're not out in the middle of nowhere. The school janitor is around, and the whole area is packed with homes and businesses. There's even a police station on the other side of the train tracks."

It was absolutely clear that the instant they fired a shot there would be a huge commotion and hordes of patrol cars would come screeching in.

"I'm willing to bet that the janitor was called away on an urgent errand, and that the officers at the nearby police station are out patrolling. If someone in the

neighborhood calls in a report, we'll have about five minutes before the cops arrive. When you've fired the hell out of that thing, tuck your tail between your legs and run. This is your school, so I'm sure you know the neighborhood."

Rei already knew that Gotouda was reckless enough to suddenly give a teenager a gun to shoot, but his plan of action was absurdly rash. Even if Rei escaped with his life, if he didn't run fast enough he'd be thrown in the slammer for illegal possession of a firearm.

"What about the bodies?"

"I guess they'll be the biggest scandal in school history. Is that a problem?"

"No ..." Rei thought for a moment before responding. "No problem. It's a plan."

Just as he had steeled himself and refreshed his grip on the gun, Gotouda put a finger up.

Rei listened attentively for a sound from above. There was a slight noise like a kite flapping in the wind, and, in the next instant, something brushed the top of his head.

A black shadow alit on the roof's handrail, flapping its huge black wings.

Like a bird landing on a twig, it folded its wings and settled down into a crouch. Immediately, another shadow landed just to the right of it, and then another one came down on its left side.

"Oh, God. *Three?*" Rei murmured in a whisper, stunned by this unexpected development.

The fiend who had called himself Kariya was already more than Rei and Gotouda could handle. Rei's expecta-

tions had been thwarted in the worst way possible, and he struggled to suppress the urge to burst into tears.

But, for some reason, the three monsters showed absolutely no interest in Rei and Gotouda. Instead, they cocked their heads slightly as if listening for something.

Their physical form just barely managed to echo that of a human being, but their behavior was purely animal.

“Ultrasound. They’re looking for Saya.”

Rei remembered the time he’d been trapped and had almost had his blood sucked, the way Kariya had frozen as if trying to detect something. Not just Kariya. Saya had done the same thing when Rei had been hiding in the barricade.

Perhaps their eyes that gleamed so ominously were excellent for spotting moving bodies, but surprisingly weak when it came to other things, requiring them to rely heavily on ultrasound. Rei kept perfectly still as if bound hand and foot, swallowing hard and keeping watch on the three creatures as he cursed Saya for not appearing at this critical moment.

The three beasts stopped moving, and the one in the middle spread its wings again and took on a defensive stance.

Here they come. Just as Rei reflexively raised the gun, Gotouda strode out in front of him. His movements were almost casual.

“Don’t move. Cover me.”

He approached the monsters, keeping the stairwell between them, shouting, “*Veni Sancte Spiritus!* Get thee behind me, Satan!”

The beast in the middle rose up from the railing and into the sky, avoiding the stairwell.

This was what Gotouda had been waiting for.

A riot gun is deadliest at short distances. In order to keep a target within the spray of the bullets, it's ideal to position its movements above the line of fire. Gotouda had approached them straight-on in his offhand manner in order to invite this action, and, with the stairwell between them, the beast would be defenselessly exposed to the gun for a brief second as it concentrated on dodging the structure. Gotouda took advantage of the opportunity to open up the 00B, point-blank.

A sound like thunder ripped through the air, reverberating across the building.

But, instead of piercing the monster's chest and sending blood and flesh flying, the bullets whizzed off into empty space, leaving only a tear in its right wing.

The moment the thing had cleared the stairwell it had twisted its body, ripping its wing but dodging Gotouda's fire. It was now gliding down toward Rei.

Gotouda was reloading his gun in a frenzy but, when he saw Rei standing stiffly in the line of fire, he immediately lowered his weapon.

Behind him, an ominous flapping sound resonated as the other two beasts lifted off into the air.

The brief skirmish had changed everything.

The beast had pretended to oblige Gotouda, dodging his bullets at the last minute and landing right between them. Now neither of them could shoot. Gotouda turned around to see the other two monsters approaching him, while the third stood facing Rei, who was a complete amateur with a gun.

Demonic cunning.

"Shoot!" Gotouda screamed, taking aim at the beast on the left of the two that were attacking him, striding toward it with big steps. This meant turning his back defensively on the other, but, already at a grave disadvantage, Gotouda was faced with no other choice.

As he watched the other beast swing a large turn and circle behind him, Gotouda faced the one in front of him and raised his gun. At that moment, a figure darted out from the shadow of the stairwell.

Just as Gotouda's gun let off another blast, the figure sprang into the air and intercepted the beast that was attacking him from behind. One of the fiend's arms flew into the air, and the concrete floor was showered in a sudden storm of blood.

The human figure that had landed between the two creatures turned in Rei's direction, her skirt fluttering vividly. It was Saya.

Without wasting a second, she raised the sword that she had been holding low to the ground and sliced into the side of the armless creature. Evading it deftly, her sword was now held high, and she bent her elbows and spun around, slitting the throat of the beast and eliciting another copious downpour of blood.

Its lightning reflexes overcome by its massive blood loss, the creature's entire body was seized by a fit of spasms.

The sublime confrontation had resembled not so much a battle as a slaughter.

"What are you doing? SHOOT!"

Gotouda's second shot had lodged in the creature's flank. He menaced the fallen beast in front of him by quickly reloading his gun as he shouted over his shoulder to Rei. He fired a third time and, when the beast was propelled backwards from the force of the impact, he closed in on it and fired a fourth and then a fifth time.

The terrific noise of the riot gun shook Rei back to his senses. When he saw the gruesome fiend advancing toward him, fangs bared, he tried to scream, but no sound came out.

He stuck out the gun and pulled the trigger, but the anticipated noise and impact failed to ensue.

All of the blood in his body froze.

He glanced down at the gun in his hands and saw that the hammer wasn't cocked. His face crumpled. The Government lacked a double-action mechanism, so, even if the chamber was loaded, the hammer had to be lifted to fire the first shot.

But there was no time even to curse his own stupidity; the heinous figure of the beast was already close enough to touch. He fumbled for the hammer, battling a feeling of hair-raising terror as he thrust the gun in the monster's face.

A globe of fire appeared before his eyes and he felt an explosion in his hands.

The beast's step reeled slightly.

Rei had jerked the gun as he'd fired, but, luckily, this had sent the bullet right into the monster's chest.

He fired a second shot, and a third. Screaming as if he were the wild beast, Rei pulled the trigger again and again in a daze.

He was unable to control the gun's barrel, and most of the shots veered off into the night sky or ricocheted off the roof and disappeared. But the bullets that did penetrate the monster's flanks and neck blasted out massive quantities of blood and flesh as they burst through the other side.

When all of the bullets were gone, the slide stopped moving and the chamber popped open.

Prayerfully, he opened his eyes. The creature raised its arms, its wings as tattered as rags.

Faced with this monstrosity, Rei wished he had an antitank rifle or grenade launcher, or, at the very least, a heavy machine gun. At that moment, the beast's raised arm separated from its shoulder and soared through the air. The beast lurched, unbalanced, and, as if by magic, its head flew off.

A shower of blood poured down on Rei, splattering loudly against the cement and shocking him out of his dreamlike stupor. His legs gave out beneath him and he sat down on the spot.

The beast crumpled to the ground.

On the other side was Saya.

She was holding up her sword and examining the blade for nicks without giving a second glance to the carcass at her feet.

The roof was a sea of blood. Everything was exactly as it had been the night he had first seen her.

Rei gazed absently at Gotouda, who was walking back toward them, swinging the riot gun carelessly. Rei recalled the words of the old man.

"She says that if she sees you again, she'll kill you ..."

Rei looked up with her, filled with an inexplicable feeling of rapture.

A white face in the darkness and eyes like flickering blue flames.

The eyes of a beast, Rei thought.

The eyes of a violently beautiful predatory monster.

Rei could hardly remember where and how he had run. He vaguely recalled the sight of Gotouda throwing the shotgun and pistol into a rainwater ditch, and that he'd taken off his blood-soaked jacket at some point and tossed it away, but that was about all he could remember.

He'd passed a fire truck speeding in the direction he'd come, its siren blaring. When he looked back, he could see the clouds over the rooftops behind him bathed in a red light.

He recalled the words Gotouda had muttered—*we kill two birds with one stone: destroy the evidence and buy some time*. Torching the school ... wasn't that going a bit far? Rei was hypocritically disapproving.

But, no matter how he tried, he couldn't recall what Saya had looked like when she had turned her back on him and walked away.

The next thing he knew, he was crouched on the floor of the ticket-sales area of a train station somewhere.

Beyond the unmanned gate, he could hear the distant echo of loudspeakers announcing a train's arrival. When he raised his head, Gotouda was leaning over him and holding out a ticket.

“Listen, kid, you’d best head over to the nightlife district and get yourself taken into custody. Find yourself a wimpy-looking teenager and pick a fight with him—two or three punches should do it. You might get roughed up a bit, but at least they won’t connect you with the arson.”

Wordlessly, Rei accepted the ticket.

The peach-colored slip of paper looked so warm, he wanted to rub it against his cheek.

“Forget about tonight as soon as you can. Forget about the girl, too. It won’t do you any good to remember ...”

Gotouda seemed as if he wanted to say more, but apparently nothing came to him. He straightened up and began to walk away.

“What are you going to do now?” Rei called after him.

Gotouda turned around and gave Rei a final hyena-like grin. “*Morieris ut canis ... die like a dog!*”

He turned away again and walked off quickly.

It was the last time Rei saw him.

EPILOGUE

Thirty years passed.

After that incident, Rei and the others continued to raise quarrels with the school, but in the end they graduated quietly, probably as a result of the school's desire to be rid of them.

Shibano married an older office-lady who lived in the apartment building his parents managed. The two of them opened up a small bar. Doigaki spent a year in cram school, after which he was accepted at a private university. For a period of time, he had become avidly involved with a zine publication, but after graduation he took a job at the local municipal office, becoming the lowest-ranking member in his family of public employees.

Amano took over the family construction business. Doigaki had fallen out of touch with the others after college.

After Aoki's release from the hospital, they never heard from him again. Rumor had it that he had been forced to transfer to a private boarding school in the country, and that he attended its affiliated university.

Although he had been lax in studying for his entrance exams, Rei, to everyone's amazement, had been miraculously accepted at a second-tier public university. College was boring, but after two extra years of school he finally graduated and

found a job. He married, too, and had a child. He bought a spec home with a twenty-year mortgage, got a divorce, and paid child support. After making all the normal mistakes that people make, he remarried, and now lived with two dogs and a cat. He had changed jobs a number of times, and, after running the gamut of magazine editorial jobs, several years ago he started to freelance. He had even written several books about movies, his old passion.

Lately, he had put on weight from drinking too much, but, aside from that, he was a fine specimen of a middle-aged man with no particular worries, swaying back and forth in a subway car headed downtown.

The afternoon train was fairly empty.

A publisher Rei had worked with was starting a magazine about movies and theater. The publisher had asked Rei to write a column for it. He was on his way to discuss the deal.

The train glided into the station, and Rei looked up from the thin pages of the magazine's first issue to read the name posted on the platform.

One more station.

The doors opened. A high school girl boarded the train and took the seat next to Rei.

Rei frowned. He had recently developed a distaste for the young. The high school girls, with their thick makeup that made them look like ageless monsters, were his least favorite of all; every time he saw them he had to struggle to suppress the urge to throw them out the window. Disgruntled, he peered at the girl, and started in surprise when he saw her face.

She wore her hair parted in the center with two braids. Her face was pale, without a trace of makeup, and her uniform was a dark blue that you didn't see often nowadays. Perhaps she was a design student; she carried a long, cardboard tube over one shoulder. But, more than anything else, Rei was struck by her eyes.

The girl seemed completely unaffected by the rude stare of the middle-aged man next to her. There was something familiar in her wide-eyed gaze and the way she cocked her head slightly, as if searching for something far away.

The train braked as it approached the next station, and, for a moment, all of the lights went out.

In that fleeting instant of darkness, he was sure he saw her eyes gleam bewitchingly.

The lights in the car recovered from the brief outage and the train pulled into the station and stopped. Its doors opened. Rei scrambled to his feet, stumbling needlessly as he stepped down onto the platform. His heart racing, he steeled himself and looked back through the window. There she was, thirty years later.

It was Saya.

She was completely unchanged.

The only thing that was different was the image of Rei that must have been reflected in her eyes.

It would have been the image of a teenager who had once been driven by something, who had shouted and raged in indignation, and who had been forced to give in and accept the harsh realities of life, leaving him completely altered.

But how on earth would this reflect in the eyes of a girl who was not permitted to change?

Rei felt as if he'd gained a tiny grain of understanding as to why Saya had not slashed him to pieces that night.

Just as the doors slid closed, the memory of those long-gone, ridiculously precious days came rushing back to Rei, accompanied by a deep ache of regret. The train started to move away.

Rei stood rooted to the spot, overcome by a profound feeling of loss.

As he watched her go, he thought he saw Saya smile ever so slightly. Or perhaps it was an illusion wrought by the thirty years gone past.

The subway train carrying the young girl with the eyes of a monster left the station slowly, then gradually sped up and disappeared into the darkness.

The following books were used as references in writing this story, and some of them were quoted in the text. The author would like to express his gratitude.

Barber, Paul. *Vampires, Burial and Death*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988. Japanese edition published by Kousakusha, translated by Mikiko Nomura.

Cartmill, Matt. *A View to Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature Through History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993. Japanese edition published by Shin-yo-sha; translated by Akiko Uchida.

De Rosa, Peter. *Vicars of Christ: the Dark Side of the Papacy*. New York: Bantam, 1988. Japanese edition published by Libroport; translated by Toshikuni Endo.

Rosuchairudo-ka; Yudaya Kokusai Zaibatu no Koubou (The Rothschilds; the Rise and Fall of a Jewish International Financial Combine) by Sanshirou Yokoyama; Kodansha gendai shinsho.

This story is set in the year 1969. In December 1993, the Vatican and Israel signed a fundamental agreement, establishing official peaceful relations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MAMORU OSHII is perhaps best known for his groundbreaking work as director of the animated television series and theatrical releases *Urusei Yatsura*, *Urusei Yatsura 2: Beautiful Dreamer*, and the two theatrical release *Ghost in The Shell* films, *Ghost in the Shell* and *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*. He has also directed several live action films, including the cyberpunk film *Avalon*, *The Red Spectacles* and *Stray Dog*. A prolific creator, Mr. Oshii worked with the creative minds at Production IG to create the multi-faceted world of *Blood the Last Vampire*, which stretches across print, videogame and film. Born in Tokyo, he currently resides in Atami, Shizuoka Prefecture.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Cover art for this novel is by KATSUYA TERADA, the highly respected anime and manga artist and designer; in addition to his many best-selling manga titles Mr. Terada was the designer of the Saya character for the film and videogame *Blood the Last Vampire* projects.