

TOKYO GOTHIC

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Chapter One

Sex and Suicide

The smells of jasmine and lavender filled the house. Somewhere music was playing. Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* drifted through the sparsely furnished rooms, the narrow corridors with their sliding paper screens. It was past midnight now. The bright lights and constant bustle of Tokyo seemed distant and unreal: a gaudy neon mirage.

Dr Yamaguchi stood by the bedroom window, staring into the night. The glittering panorama of Tokyo's gilded skyscrapers resembled the enchanted citadel of a cautionary fable. Beneath its brilliant façade, there lay darkness. Dr Yamaguchi had seen that darkness. Touched it.

He had *contributed* to it.

The music drew to a close. The final chords of *Death and the Maiden* dissolved on the scented air like the vague recollection of a dream. Dreams and memories haunted Dr Yamaguchi. He knew only one way to exorcise them. Drawing the blinds, he turned away from the window and walked towards the bed.

Taro lay across the bed. She was completely naked. In the subdued lighting the tattooed flesh of her back, buttocks, upper arms and thighs assumed a startling luminosity. The subtle variations of the vermilion *zumi* pigments had transformed her radiant white skin into an extravagant tapestry of surreal complexity. The sensual dimensions of her figure imbued the glamorous collage with the illusion of depth and perspective. It exuded a profound, erotic power.

Dr Yamaguchi sat on the bed. He stared down at Taro. Long, blue-black hair framed her elegant features like a sleek veil. Her complexion was flawless: alabaster white. Remote and unknowable, her expression implied the timeless serenity of a cemetery angel. Her large, almond-shaped eyes were a startling shade of green: jade runes filled with a strange enchantment. Dr Yamaguchi remembered the folk tale of the *Yuki Onna*, the mysterious Snow Woman who prowled the mountains of rural Japan, lying in wait for unwary travellers. Taro's haunting beauty held him enthralled. He felt a twinge of sadness. After tonight, he would never experience

this exquisite pain of longing again.

Dr Yamaguchi unfastened the sash, and allowed his kimono to fall to the floor. He was fifty-two years old, but he had taken care of himself. He was tall and slim. His limbs and torso were lean. His gaunt features suggested an austere nature.

Dr Yamaguchi lay down beside Taro. Her illustrated skin scintillated in the light of the flickering candles. As he touched her, Dr Yamaguchi was struck by how unnaturally cool her skin felt. Of course, there was no real mystery to it. There was a simple medical explanation. It was because of her tattoos. Covering such large areas of the body with indelible inks significantly reduced epidermal respiration. Body temperature was drastically lowered as a result. Some maintained it shortened life expectancy too. They believed that the painful and protracted process of full-body tattooing was an act of martyrdom—that the elaborate designs themselves constituted a promissory suicide note written on one's own skin. Perhaps that was true. And yet many men found the sight of a beautiful woman's tattooed skin irresistible. Dr Yamaguchi understood this. Taro's illustrated flesh excited him intensely.

Sex and suicide.

Taro rose onto her hands and knees. Planting his hands firmly on her hips, Dr Yamaguchi entered her from behind. The contrast between the persistent coolness of her skin and the heat of her sex was startling. The walls of Taro's vagina enveloped his rigid penis in a soft, carnal grip. It was firm yet irresistible, like a velvet anemone lubricated with intoxicating nectars. Dr Yamaguchi found himself thinking once more of the legend of the *Yuki Onna*. He could imagine himself in the role of some hapless pilgrim, succumbing to a cold-blooded siren on the white-capped slopes of Mount Fuji itself.

Taro writhed in Dr Yamaguchi's embrace. His sweat glistened on her back and shoulders. The vivid pigments seemed to ripple across her body. It was as if the strange tattoos had taken on a life of their own. Dr Yamaguchi plunged himself into her as deeply as he could. His pace increased with each successive thrust. Taro's sex exerted an irresistible gravity like the event horizon of a black sun: a cosmic enigma luring entire constellations to their doom.

The synergy of sex and death was an immutable law.

Inescapable.

Dr Yamaguchi abandoned himself to it

His entire body shuddering uncontrollably, Dr Yamaguchi finally ejaculated. Semen jetted violently from his jerking penis in a single, uninterrupted stream like a rope of burning solder. Taro's slender frame felt rigid beneath him. As she climaxed simultaneously, Taro gasped breathlessly. The silken magnificence of her glossy, blue-black hair cascaded forward, covering her face. She arched her back, expressing the gaudy finery of her decorated flesh. It was as if she was performing the final gesture of an elaborate ritual, the courtship display of a lascivious chameleon.

As his penis gradually softened within the musky vent of Taro's captivating sex, Dr Yamaguchi stared down at the central motif dominating the collage of overlapping images etched onto her back. It depicted an ominous figure, dressed in hooded red robes. A grinning death's head peered out from beneath its cowl. A deck of Tarot cards fanned out between the spectre's skeletal fingers. The Tarot cards implied imminent catastrophe. Dr Yamaguchi could see his own future imprinted on the canvas of Taro's cool skin. But he was not afraid.

He had come too far for that now.

Dr Yamaguchi accepted the inevitable as he held Taro's body in his arms. He understood that this was the last time they would be together. He embraced that too, with a sense of resignation. As he looked down at Taro, Dr Yamaguchi was reminded of how otherworldly she sometimes seemed. She was drifting off into a deep, languid sleep. Curled up against his chest she resembled a strange, changeling child: an alluring wraith. Her cold skin shimmered in the candlelight. Dr Yamaguchi remembered the legend of the Buddhist monk seduced by a snake. In the last brief moments before sleep finally claimed him, he found it amusing to imagine himself re-enacting the role of that errant pilgrim, a coiled reptile slumbering in his warm embrace.

Chapter Two

Death's Faithful Handmaid

Dawn.

Dr Yamaguchi contemplated his final sunrise. After a time, he turned from the window and walked slowly towards the centre of the room. The room was sparsely furnished. Tatami mats covered the wooden floor. A meticulously tended *bonsai* garden—dwarf elms and a stunted cherry tree in full blossom—occupied one corner. A series of *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints hung on the walls. A brace of traditional screens—antiques dating from the Meiji era—was decorated with scenes from the legend of the Forty-Seven Ronin. Between the screens a Tokugawa period samurai sword and dagger were mounted on a teak display rack. The weapons remained sheathed in glistening scabbards of polished black enamel.

The melancholy twang of a lonely *shamisen* drifted through the house. The sublime melody recalled the virtues of a bygone age: a tenth century lament composed at the height of the Heian era.

Perfect.

Dr Yamaguchi was dressed in an ankle-length kimono of radiant white silk. He was about to perform a sacred ceremony. This would be the defining aspect of his life. The ultimate act of self-realisation. *The spirit is strong but sometimes flesh is stronger. Otherwise why sacrifice it?*

He knelt in front of a low black table. A sheet of white rice paper was spread before him. To the right of the parchment stood a calligraphy brush and a pot of black ink. Dipping the brush into the ink, Dr Yamaguchi considered the blank sheet of paper briefly. Then he began to write, tracing the characters swiftly and efficiently. In a very short time, he had finished.

Dr Yamaguchi unfastened his kimono and allowed it to slide from his shoulders. He was completely naked, except for a white loincloth. A small wooden stool had been placed directly in front of the teak display rack where the sword and dagger were handsomely mounted. Dr Yamaguchi crouched down, his legs folded beneath him. His knees touched the tatami matting as he arranged his buttocks on the stool.

Without a moment's hesitation, Dr Yamaguchi reached out and lifted the dagger from the display rack. Taro had already taken the sword from its customary resting place. Sliding the blade from its scabbard, she wielded the weapon in a firm, two-handed grip.

Taro was wearing a traditional white kimono with a silver brocade obi. White foundation make-up accentuated her natural pallor. She had painted her lips to approximate the symbolic shape of a scarlet lotus blossom. Her long black hair hung down about her shoulders. In the dawn's early light her large green eyes assumed a hypnotic iridescence.

As Dr Yamaguchi made his final preparations, Taro watched in silence, a sombre revenant. In her traditional make-up and costume, she resembled the vengeful spectre of a wronged Edo lady.

Death's faithful handmaid.

Dr Yamaguchi unsheathed the dagger. Its short blade gleamed like polished glass. Gripping its hilt in both hands, Dr Yamaguchi pressed the tip of the dagger to his abdomen, selecting a point of entry two inches above his groin.

A moment passed.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dr Yamaguchi caught a glimpse of the dwarf cherry tree, its stunted branches laden with delicate pink flowers. He had tended that tree since he was a boy, schooled in the art of *bonsai* by his father. He found himself wondering how different things might have been if he'd followed in his father's footsteps and chosen a career in horticulture instead of medicine—or, to be more specific, *psychiatry*. The question was not only futile. It was immaterial. Had he chosen this? Was it karma? It hardly mattered. The die was cast. The outcome was—and always had been—inevitable.

A flurry of blossoms fell from the boughs of the cherry tree, a traditional image symbolising the brevity of human existence, the fragility of life itself. The petals' languid descent, accompanied by the music of the *shamisen*, recalled the climax of an ancient tragedy endlessly retold in the *kabuki* dramas he had loved since childhood.

How appropriate, he thought, a strange smile playing about his lips.

Dr Yamaguchi inserted the dagger into his abdomen, pushing the blade deep into

his guts. The pain was indescribable. He drew the blade upwards under his ribcage. Twisting it awkwardly, struggling to remain upright, he then made a horizontal incision across his belly. Slicing through layers of tissue, Dr Yamaguchi hacked at the tightly packed spirals of his vulnerable internal organs. He pulled the dagger free. Blood erupted from the wound, a furious torrent. Coils of steaming entrails spilled from the bony cradle of his pelvis. The slippery organs unravelled lazily. Red veils descended behind Dr Yamaguchi's eyes as his intestines flopped into his lap and slid between his naked thighs. The dagger fell silently to the blood-drenched tatami between his knees.

And yet somehow—in spite of the pain—Dr Yamaguchi clung to life, maintaining his composure. His guts were congealing in an obscene pool around his knees, but his resolve held firm. While his life flooded away, he remained determined to see the sacred ceremony—the ritual *sepukku* favoured by the honourable suicides of Edo—to its prescribed conclusion. The meaning of his life depended upon the manner of his death.

Dr Yamaguchi sagged forward. His body quivered with the effort as he lowered his head and shoulders. He offered his neck to Taro.

And waited.

Throughout the entire process Taro had remained standing by Dr Yamaguchi's shoulder, watching. Her serene features were expressionless. Not a flicker of emotion registered in her occluded eyes. They were impenetrable, opaque as ancient jade.

Taro raised the sword high above her head. She waited for a moment, timing her stroke perfectly. The blade hovered in the air. Its brilliant surface glittered harshly in the violent rays of the rising sun. Outside, the sky was a sea of blood.

The blade descended in a silvery blur.

Taro decapitated Dr Yamaguchi with a single blow. A column of blood erupted from the stump of his neck, propelling his head across the room. His corpse toppled forward slowly, almost peacefully. Gouts of foaming crimson continued to spurt from his severed veins and arteries, a vast sticky pool spreading across the tatami.

Blood spattered Taro's smooth cheek and the folds of her white kimono. It seemed to form strange designs. She walked to the low table on the other side of the

room, studying Dr Yamaguchi's stylised calligraphy on the sheet of white rice paper. Like the blood on her face and gown, the ink had hardly had time to dry.

Reading the lines he'd written, Taro nodded her head slowly, approvingly.

Catastrophe beckoned.

Chapter Three

Hara-kiri Haiku

Inspector Koichi Sakamoto arrived at the scene shortly before noon.

Dr Yamaguchi's house was situated in Yanaka, an old-fashioned district that had miraculously survived the genocidal firebombing that reduced most of Tokyo to charred ruins at the end of WWII.

It was early spring. On his way here, Sakamoto had driven up through Ueno. The ancient sakura were heavy with cherry blossoms. Pilgrims were attending the Kiyomizo Kannon-do shrine, laying dolls at the feet of the thousand-armed goddess: women desperate to conceive. *There's something sad about that*, Sakamoto often thought. But he understood it. Loneliness expressed itself in many different ways.

Dr Yamaguchi's home stood in a quiet narrow street, a typical, two-storey wooden building. It was closely adjacent to Yanaka-Ginza, the modest shopping promenade with its old family establishments selling traditional craftware and speciality foods. From the second floor, one had a clear view of the famous Yanaka cemetery—the final resting place of the last Tokugawa *shogun*, Yoshinobu—the setting of the Tenno-ji temple.

Sakamoto's profession meant that he generally frequented the city's less salubrious areas, rubbing shoulders with the dregs of society. It almost made a pleasant change to take a break from the slums. Almost. *One meets a better class of criminal—and a far classier corpse—in Yanaka*, he thought as he cast a cursory eye over the traditional accoutrements, the minimal furnishings and antique *objects d'art* that adorned Dr Yamaguchi's home. It all seemed very anachronistic.

And so did the deliberate violence that characterised the psychiatrist's death.

Dr Yamaguchi's body remained in a kneeling position, bent over double. His shoulders touched the tatami. The mats were dark with congealed blood. The corpse was completely naked, except for a soiled loincloth. The skin had assumed a waxy pallor. It was luminous in the hard, bright sunlight that streamed in through the windows. Something about the body reminded Sakamoto of the morbid statuary of a Gothic cathedral. The austere trappings of the place enhanced the illusion. It was as

if Yamaguchi's home was a carefully mounted stage, the setting for a traditional *kabuki* tragedy. And he had cast himself as the doomed hero, embracing a fatal destiny.

"It's like stepping back five hundred years in time, isn't it, Inspector?"

Dr Kurosawa, the Chief of Forensic Pathology attached to Department Z, was leaning over the body. He had inserted a thermometer into its liver.

"So, Doctor, any idea of the time of death here?" Sakamoto said.

"Hmmm, the temperature of the body is eighty-nine degrees. I wouldn't place the time of death at much more than six to eight hours ago—" Dr Kurosawa delivered his pronouncements blithely. He was an ebullient character, a natural extrovert.

Sakamoto looked out the window. The sun had reached its zenith. Somewhere faraway, Tokyo's imposing skyscrapers shimmered like the star-clad ziggurats of an enchanted empire: jewelled megaliths opaque with sacred light. But here that seemed unreal—a fleeting vision of an impossible future. Sakamoto felt as if he'd been engulfed by a strange dream of the past. The old shrines of Ueno remained just a stone's throw away. He looked out across the vast Yanaka cemetery. The graveyard dominated his view. Ancient deaths dictated tradition. After a few moments, he gathered his thoughts, and remarked: "Six to eight hours ago? That's interesting—"

"You think it's significant, Inspector—?" asked Kurosawa.

"Between four and six a.m. this morning," Sakamoto observed. "That would have made it dawn when this happened. I think it might be important."

"The rising sun, you mean—?"

"Well, yes. It's emblematic of the old Imperial flag—all the traditional values and virtues that implies. If one were going to end one's life in such a symbolic style, it seems likely one would pay attention to that kind of detail. You only have to take a look around this place. I think it speaks volumes—"

"Volumes, eh? Strange you should say that."

"Strange—?"

"What do you know about him—the deceased, I mean—any background at all?" said Dr Kurosawa, wiping blood and bile from the thermometer.

“I know he was a psychiatrist. Maybe he could have used some therapy himself.”

“Perhaps it’s an occupational hazard,” Dr Kurosawa suggested.

“What? You think madness might be contagious?”

“I wouldn’t like to say. But it certainly looks like Dr Yamaguchi got up on the wrong side of the couch this morning, eh?”

“Of course, there is another possibility—”

“You mean the Irruptions?” Dr Kurosawa interjected, anticipating Sakamoto.

“Yes.”

“No. I don’t think that’s what we’re dealing with here.”

“You seem very sure of yourself, Kurosawa. What makes you so certain?”

“The act of *seppuku*—ritual suicide—is a strict procedure. It’s practically a sacrament. It requires discipline. We also found a white kimono lying close by. During the Edo period, it was the customary attire of a noble suicide. He disembowelled himself, using *this*—” Dr Kurosawa was holding a plastic evidence bag. It contained a traditional samurai dagger known as a *tanto*, its razor-sharp blade dark with dried blood. “It’s difficult to appreciate the sheer effort of will that must take—”

Sakamoto looked down at the body. Dr Yamaguchi was lying in a congealed pool of his own guts. His spilled entrails appeared to have baked in the early morning sunshine. It looked as if they had caramelised, glistening brightly like putrid candy.

“And that’s what distinguishes this from the Irruptions,” Dr Kurosawa continued. “It’s the sheer deliberation. The typical Irruption is undisciplined. Chaotic. And there is another crucial distinction.”

“Yes—?”

“The *direction* of the violence. Those who succumb to the Irruptions direct their pent-up rage and aggression outwards. They seek victims. This is violence directed at oneself: an act of atonement or despair, perhaps. The careful staging denotes premeditation. In fact, I’d go as far as to say that Yamaguchi might have been planning this for years—”

“Years? What makes you think that?”

“Remember what you said earlier about this place speaking *volumes*?”

“And you said it was strange I should say that. Yes, I remember.”

“Well, Dr Yamaguchi wasn’t just a psychiatrist. He was also an author. He published several books. At a rough guess, I’d say at least a dozen.”

“So, he was a writer, huh? What kind of stuff?”

“Oh, quite a broad range of subjects. There were the psychiatric works, of course. I seem to recall a couple of novels, as well as a few histories covering the Heian, Tokugawa and Meiji Restoration eras.”

“And how does that tie in with...*this*—?”

“Well, Dr Yamaguchi was rather enamoured with the traditional values of the feudal elite. He was particularly fascinated by the *seppuku* ceremony. He seemed to see it as the definition of the old chivalric code, the quintessence of a nobler time whose ethical sensibilities were infinitely superior to our own.”

“So, in a way, he was *rehearsing* the act in his writing.”

“It’s possible.”

“I suppose it would be too much to hope that he actually left a suicide note.”

“After a fashion—” Kurosawa smiled enigmatically.

Sakamoto stared down at the sheet of white rice paper. It was embellished with traditional calligraphy. Dr Yamaguchi had left something, it seemed: a final testament of sorts. Sakamoto wasn’t sure he’d call it a suicide note, though.

Madness runs rampant

The plague cannot be contained

Soon all will be lost

Sakamoto recognised the form immediately. Seventeen syllables arranged in the precise form of a traditional *haiku*: five, then seven, followed by five. It fitted the established pattern, the ritualistic dimensions of the psychiatrist’s ceremonial suicide. But what did it *mean*?

“Well, that’s pretty opaque,” Sakamoto finally said. “I guess he didn’t want to make things too easy for us to figure out, eh?”

“It was customary for the suicides of the Edo period to compose a death poem,” Dr Kurosawa observed. “Considering how meticulous Dr Yamaguchi has been in every other respect, I’d have been surprised if he’d deviated from the protocols even slightly.”

“A *hara-kiri haiku*? It makes sense, I suppose.”

Dr Kurosawa’s eyes were bright and alert behind the glittering lenses of his metal-framed spectacles. He was studying Sakamoto’s expression, apparently reading his thoughts. “Something’s troubling you, isn’t it, Inspector?”

“Well, we’re rather overlooking the obvious, don’t you think?”

“You mean the fact he didn’t act alone?”

“Unless you’re about to tell me *that* was self inflicted—” Sakamoto pointed at the stump of Dr Yamaguchi’s neck. The severed veins and arteries were sealed with a dark crust of dense scab tissue.

“Hardly.”

“Any idea how it was done?” Sakamoto asked, referring to the fatal wound.

“I’d say the weapon was a traditional samurai sword.”

“And whoever assisted Yamaguchi took the weapon with them?”

“Yes, but that’s not all.”

Sakamoto was curious. “There’s something else?”

Dr Kurosawa seemed a little amused. “You mean you haven’t noticed yet? What else is missing from this picture?”

Sakamoto looked around. And then it hit him.

The head! Where the hell is Yamaguchi’s head?

“That’s right, Sakamoto,” said Kurosawa, grinning. “Whoever decapitated Yamaguchi didn’t just take the sword. They took the good doctor’s head with them too!”

Chapter Four

How to Philosophise with a Scalpel

The Senryu Institute was situated fifty miles outside Tokyo. Dr Yamaguchi had founded it twenty years earlier. As well as being a facility that specialised in experimental psychiatry it was also described as a *cultural think tank*.

The Institute itself was located in idyllic countryside. The building, an imposing, concrete monolith, seemed curiously out of place. It was almost as if someone had taken an anonymous office block and transplanted it here, an affront to nature's quiet dignity.

When he entered the foyer, Sakamoto was struck by a curious sense of *déjà vu*. The bleak façade of the SENTRY Institute belied the distinctly traditional flavour of its interior. The reception area resembled the atrium of a medieval palace. An exquisite fountain fed a large, artificial lagoon where brightly coloured *koi* glided silently. There was a miniature arboretum, which included dwarf elms and cherry trees. Sakamoto was irresistibly reminded of Dr Yamaguchi's home: the bonsai garden, the *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints and the traditional furnishings. It seemed as if the psychiatrist's aesthetic sense extended to his place of business too.

“Inspector Sakamoto—”

Sakamoto found himself confronted with a strikingly beautiful young woman. Tall and slim, with long blue-black hair, her skin was very pale, utterly flawless. Her eyes were large and extremely dark: black as flint. Something about her expression seemed rather remote, slightly melancholy. She wore a stylish black dress with long sleeves and a high neckline, sheer black stockings and high heels. Whilst revealing nothing, the dress subtly implied the lithe perfection of her body.

“Yuki Horiuchi,” she said, introducing herself. “I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting, Inspector. Please excuse me.”

Sakamoto was further surprised when she broke with the traditional Eastern custom of bowing and extended her slender white hand in greeting. As he took her hand, Sakamoto noticed how cool her skin felt.

“No apology necessary,” Sakamoto finally replied with genuine sincerity.

The interview was conducted in Dr Yamaguchi's office.

Miss Horiuchi sat behind his desk. She looked a little out of place there, like an innocent princess inheriting the empire of an insane tyrant. She was a qualified psychologist, who had worked as Dr Yamaguchi's research assistant for several years. Sakamoto had spoken to her on the phone and touched on the details of Dr Yamaguchi's suicide before arranging this meeting. But he hadn't expected her to be quite so young—or so beautiful. It made him feel slightly off-guard.

"As I indicated earlier, Miss Horiuchi," Sakamoto began. "The circumstances surrounding Dr Yamaguchi's death were highly unusual. I was wondering if you might be able shed any light on his state of mind. Was he under any particular stress or pressure? Could there have been something about his work that might have contributed to a mental crisis?"

"Something about his work—?" Miss Horiuchi's large eyes narrowed slightly. "What do you know about Dr Yamaguchi's work, Inspector?"

"To be frank, next to nothing," Sakamoto admitted candidly. "I was hoping you might be able to fill me in."

"Well, as you know, Dr Yamaguchi was a psychiatrist. He had devised a very specialised area of analysis, which he termed *social psychopathology*."

"It sounds like he was attempting to psychoanalyse society. Or is that a crude analogy?"

"No, Inspector, it isn't crude at all. Essentially, you're correct. The basis of Dr Yamaguchi's work concerned what he termed the problem of *cultural dissonance*, with specific reference to the phenomena he described as *psychosexual dysfunction* and *societal identity disruption*."

"Hmmm, that all sounds a touch...*technical*. Perhaps you could explain."

"By all means. In basic terms, the core of Dr Yamaguchi's hypothesis was that the pressures of conformity and consumerism had alienated the population from its true cultural roots, which are the foundation of a healthy society. He compared the process to a virus infecting a biological organism. He identified the current epidemic of so-called Irruptions, which manifest typically in motiveless crimes of a violent—and generally sexual—nature, as a major symptom of this contamination."

“An interesting theory,” Sakamoto observed. “I assume if he believed he’d identified the cause of the problem, he also suggested some kind of solution—”

“Do you mean a *cure*, Inspector—?”

“Well, yes. Something like that, I suppose—”

“I’m not sure if you’d call it a cure exactly,” Miss Horiuchi replied enigmatically. “But, in order to combat a virus, the most effective course of action is inoculation.”

“*Inoculation?*”

“Metaphorically speaking. What Dr Yamaguchi proposed was a kind of cultural renaissance: a synthesis of the positive, traditional values within a modern societal context. He considered it a dialectical solution.”

“A *dialectical solution*: just what do you mean by that?”

“Dialectical theory asserts that the conflict between two opposing forces of equal strength will produce a third force which combines the most positive qualities of both,” Miss Horiuchi explained. “Dr Yamaguchi believed the old values were not strong enough to resist the pressures of decadent inversion prevalent today. They would have to be *revitalised*, adapted to thrive in our current cultural climate.”

“I see,” Sakamoto commented. “But how would it actually work?”

“Work? What makes you think it would work, Inspector?”

“Well, I’m not sure. It’s just that, as his research assistant, I kind of assumed you’d support his hypothesis, I suppose.”

“Treating an entire society is rather different than dealing with an individual patient, Inspector,” Miss Horiuchi observed. “Dr Yamaguchi’s conclusions were provocative. Some considered them *heretical*. As far as dialectical solutions to society’s problems go, you may recall that Socrates—the founder of dialecticism—was forced to drink hemlock. The tyrants of Athens suborned his suicide. Socrates welcomed death as the cure to a lifelong illness. He accepted it *philosophically*, if you’ll pardon the pun.”

“If Dr Yamaguchi felt persecuted, could it have driven him to take his own life?” Sakamoto asked. “His death was staged like an act of martyrdom. It reminded me of Mishima’s suicide—it was obviously intended as a statement of some kind.”

“I’m not sure I’m qualified to comment. Professionally, I mean,” Miss Horiuchi demurred from replying directly. There was something in her manner Sakamoto had

failed to notice earlier, an innate shyness he found extremely attractive.

“I think you’re being rather too modest, Miss Horiuchi,” Sakamoto insisted. “You must have some insight into the man, his state of mind—not to mention your obvious familiarity with the complexities of his work.”

Miss Horiuchi said nothing. She simply bowed graciously, exuding an air of archaic mystery like an elegant temple priestess. Sakamoto had the unshakeable sense that she was something of an enigma.

“I have some photographs here,” Sakamoto said, taking a folder from his briefcase. “I’d very much appreciate it, if you’d take a look at them. But I should warn you: their content is rather, uh, explicit—”

“Explicit—?”

“They’re official police photographs taken at the scene of Dr Yamaguchi’s suicide.”

“I see—”

Sakamoto couldn’t readily identify the true nature of her reaction. Was it a hint of anxiety he detected there? Or was she simply...*intrigued*? “Please, Miss Horiuchi, don’t feel in any way obliged to view these pictures. If you’d prefer not to look, I completely understand.”

“Please, Inspector, don’t feel awkward on my behalf,” said Miss Horiuchi, accepting the file Sakamoto passed to her. “I’m really not as squeamish as all that, you know. During my time here, I’ve witnessed some of the more extreme manifestations of elevated psychosis. It was, after all, Dr Yamaguchi’s particular area of expertise. In fact, he had a phrase he liked to use to describe the nature of forensic analysis—”

“Really?”

Miss Horiuchi’s expression was remote, an elegant sphinx, as she said, “*In order to dissect the delicate membranes of madness, one must transcend conventional medicine—and learn how to philosophise with a scalpel.*”

Chapter Five

The Manji Configuration

As she leafed through the photos, Sakamoto noticed how Miss Horiuchi's expression remained unchanged. She didn't exhibit the slightest flicker of emotion. Sakamoto realised he wouldn't need to use kid gloves with her, despite her apparent delicacy.

"Everything about Dr Yamaguchi's death conforms with the traditional etiquette of the *seppuku* ceremony. But *these* things," Sakamoto indicated two photographs, "they just don't fit the pattern. And yet, considering the careful staging of the scene, I can't believe that either Dr Yamaguchi—or his accomplice—didn't regard them as somehow important. Meaningful. I assume you know what they are—"

"Of course," said Miss Horiuchi, nodding sagely. "Tarot cards."

"I don't suppose you have any idea what it means?" Sakamoto enquired, pointing out the single card that had been discovered close to Dr Yamaguchi's body.

"As a matter of fact, I think I might," Miss Horiuchi replied. "It's the Nine of Swords. It's traditionally associated with feelings of worry, guilt, anguish and despair."

"Well, in the case of a suicide, I suppose that's understandable. If you don't mind me asking, how do you know so much about the Tarot? I mean it's a bit *esoteric*—"

"Dr Yamaguchi was fascinated with the occult, the symbolism of magic and mysticism. He viewed the phenomena from a psychological perspective, of course. Over the years, he made a thorough study of these matters—all sorts of esoteric subjects, as you say. As his assistant, I was involved in that research."

"Since you're obviously something of an expert, perhaps you might also have some thoughts about *this*—"

The photograph depicted a spread of nine Tarot cards, composed exclusively from the Major Arcana: the Magician, the High Priestess, the Fool, the Wheel of Fortune, the Hanged Man, the Devil, the Knight of Swords, the Hermit and Death. They were arranged in a familiar shape.

"It's not a spread used in traditional divination to the best of my knowledge," Miss Horiuchi finally said. "Perhaps that is significant."

“How do you mean?”

“I mean the way the cards have been laid out to form this shape. It’s a Manji Configuration,” Miss Horiuchi explained. “In Buddhism it’s a solar symbol, denoting good fortune. But here it’s been reversed into an anti-clockwise direction.”

“A star of ill-omen, you mean?” said Sakamoto.

“Exactly. And, of course, you’re aware of its more common associations—politically, I mean. These days this sign is more familiar by its *Sanskrit* name—”

Sakamoto nodded and frowned thoughtfully. “A swastika.”

“Do you think there was a political dimension to Dr Yamaguchi’s death, Inspector?” Miss Horiuchi asked. “You mentioned earlier there were similarities between his suicide and the case of Yukio Mishima who was an advocate of totalitarian ideology and an admirer of Hitler.”

“It crossed my mind. But it doesn’t quite ring true.”

“Really—?”

“Mishima killed himself in the spotlight. It was an overtly political, narcissistic act. There is something about Dr Yamaguchi’s suicide that seems much more personal. Somehow...*intimate*. I’m not sure if that’s the right word. If there is anything like a political aspect here, then it’s something much more...obscure.”

“Yes, I’m inclined to agree, Inspector,” Miss Horiuchi remarked. “I think the political connotations of the Manji Configuration are misleading. But if you consider it together with the *haiku*, it does suggest a pattern of sorts. Take another look—”

Sakamoto leaned across the desk. His eyes scanned the seventeen syllables that had been puzzling him ever since he’d first discovered the obscure verse, reading aloud:

“Madness runs rampant

“The plague cannot be contained

“Soon all will be lost”

Sakamoto suddenly realised he’d intruded upon Miss Horiuchi’s personal space more closely than he’d intended. He felt acutely conscious of her slender body. The tight black dress clearly defined the enticing curves of her small breasts, slim hips and thighs. Shimmering in the sunlight, her sleek black hair accentuated her radiant

complexion. Her pale skin assumed the translucent glow of fresh snow. It surprised Sakamoto how readily he succumbed to her spell.

“The language Dr Yamaguchi employed in the *haiku* is very impersonal,” said Miss Horiuchi. “It’s possible it wasn’t intended as a suicide note at all—at least not in the conventional sense. It could be interpreted as a prediction.”

“A prediction?”

“Dr Yamaguchi concluded the *haiku* with the line ‘*soon all will be lost.*’ Why would a man on the brink of suicide write in the future tense? After all, he *has* no future. And then there are the Tarot cards themselves. It’s the *association* with future events that is really important here. And I think that’s the point of the Manji Configuration. Its significance is cosmic.”

“*Cosmic?*”

“The Manji is a sign of good fortune in its *clockwise* configuration. Reversed, it signifies catastrophe. The *haiku* consists of seventeen syllables. In numerology the Manji—or swastika—is associated with the number seventeen. The sum of its angles squared is believed to encode the ultimate, elemental power of the cosmos, subtle energies that can be harnessed for either good or evil. It strikes me as more than mere coincidence.”

“Yes. I see your point,” Sakamoto replied thoughtfully. “It seems you were right when you suggested we’d be barking up the wrong tree looking for a political motivation here. Whatever prompted Dr Yamaguchi’s suicide, it’s startling to look—well, I’m not sure exactly how to describe it—but *occult* is startling to sound as good a word as any.”

“Politics and the occult aren’t mutually exclusive,” Miss Horiuchi observed mysteriously. “There have been cases—even in recent history—where the two have merged. And the consequences were genuinely catastrophic.”

“Totalitarian politics as the expression of a secret mystery school, is that it?” Sakamoto sounded less than convinced. “Conspiracy theory stuff.”

“Perhaps,” Miss Horiuchi admitted casually. “But there’s something else here that might be implied by the association of the *haiku*, the Tarot cards arranged in the Manji Configuration and the number seventeen.”

“Something else?”

“The number seventeen and the Manji symbol are associated in the *I Ching* with Hexagram 17, which is also known as *sui*,” Miss Horiuchi explained.

“*Sui*—?” Sakamoto interjected abruptly. “As in *suicide*?”

“No. It denotes *following* or *loyalty*. In some cases, *sui* signifies blind obedience and submission. Even *tyranny*.”

“Loyalty and blind obedience, eh?” Sakamoto considered this for a moment. “Dr Yamaguchi’s accomplice must have been extremely loyal to become involved in something like this. Perhaps, *fanatical* would be a better description—”

“During the Edo Period, of course, such things were not uncommon. A disgraced nobleman could usually rely on a trusted comrade to deliver the *coup de grace* after he’d finished disembowelling himself. And, as you pointed out earlier, there are similarities with the Mishima case. He certainly inspired a fanatical degree of devotion among his followers in the Shield Society.”

“And that brings us back to politics and mysticism,” Sakamoto said glumly.

“And there’s something else to consider—”

“Yes?”

“In feudal times when a nobleman was unjustly driven to suicide, the second who assisted him was bound to avenge the injustice.”

Chapter Six

Hell is a City

“Hell is a city. Rather like Tokyo, I suppose. Wordsworth actually compared the abode of the damned to *London*. But one city is much like another. Cities are machines. They have been designed with a single purpose: to consume the natural resources of the planet and destroy the products of human labour. The manufacture of *waste* is the ultimate, economic expression of totalitarian technology. Cities are the theatres of an insidious form of warfare. It is a silent war conducted with quiet weapons. And it is waged by the world’s ruling elites against their own, unsuspecting populations.”

Taro’s voice reverberated through the cavernous interior of the abandoned factory, echoes upon echoes. The place remained in almost total darkness. Flickering light bulbs dangled from the ceiling. The hum of a generator was clearly audible. A distinct, fluttering sound could be heard. It emanated from the building’s exposed rafters. Wings.

Taro wore a long, black, leather coat, tightly fastened with a wide belt that accentuated the waspish dimensions of her narrow waist. Her legs were visible from the knee down, white flesh luminous in the gloom. Glass crunched beneath her high, stiletto-heeled shoes as she walked slowly across the floor.

“Greed is God. It’s a simple philosophy. The blasphemy of Mammon enshrines the economy of Hell. It requires neither faith nor ideology. Like all totalitarian systems it is considered to be true for one simple reason. It apparently *works*.” Taro looked up at Tanaka. Her jewelled eyes glowed with occult power. “The God of Greed is dead. His aeon has passed. But you refuse to see that. So I have to teach you the hard way.”

Hiroshi Tanaka was hanging upside down, a sturdy length of rope tied around his left ankle. The rope had been thrown over a broad support beam, hoisting Tanaka high above the ground. His right leg bent at a precise right angle, the ankle remained tied behind his left knee, ensuring he maintained this posture. Both hands were lashed behind his back. He was naked. The shrivelled nub of his penis and the tight

scrotal sac shrank drastically as they succumbed to the cold. Duct tape was plastered over his mouth. Tears filled his small bloodshot eyes. His skin assumed the colour of rancid wax.

A gasoline smell filled the abandoned factory.

Tanaka was suspended over a fifty-gallon drum of tar. Orange flames lapped hungrily at the scorched metal. The tar bubbled like molten lava.

“The Gnostic heretics of medieval Europe believed the material world was not part of God’s creation, but the work of an evil Demiurge,” Taro continued. “They regarded all matter as intrinsically corrupt. According to their philosophy, the Almighty’s true creation was a dimension of pure spirit. If one accepts that premise, then one is forced to draw an inescapable conclusion: the earth is nothing more than a precinct of Hell itself. We are born, live our lives—and die—in Hell.”

There was a sudden rustling among the rafters, unseen movement in the darkness.

“And if this Hell, then our purpose here is simply to suffer.”

Tanaka’s body rotated slowly. A perfect rectangle of skin had been removed from his back. Taro reached out and touched the wound. Her fingertips came away wet. In the darkness the blood looked quite black. Taro stared down at it, fascinated.

It was time to begin.

Music filled the factory. A Bellini aria. The soprano’s voice soared above the orchestral accompaniment. The decaying rafters vibrated, disturbing the obscure shapes that squatted irritably in the darkness. Powerful wings flapped noisily.

A portable stereo system with powerful speakers rested on a small, metal table. Taro lowered the volume slightly. The brief commotion in the darkness died down.

“I’m almost ready now, Taro.”

Haiku was sitting at a table a few metres to Taro’s left. A selection of surgical instruments was arranged on a bolt of white linen beside her. The fabric was soiled here and there with stains of vivid crimson. They were still moist.

Haiku was wrapping a bloody rectangle of fresh, human skin between two sheets of white rice paper. She performed the procedure with delicate efficiency, like a *sushi* chef rolling a slice of raw salmon between layers of blanched seaweed. She opened a large container, the type used for transporting donor organs. It was filled

with dry ice. A milky white cloud of carbon dioxide vapour billowed from inside as she popped the lid. Haiku carefully placed the macabre confection into the container and sealed it again.

A third sheet of rice paper lay on the table. Taro lifted it, studying the flawless calligraphy. She read the lines carefully. Finally she smiled and nodded. “Yes, that’s good. Very good,” she said, her soft voice a subtle, feline purr.

“Thank you,” Haiku replied with obvious sincerity, bowing deeply. Her tiny white face was almost lost under the hanging tresses of her long, black hair. Glittering with some unknowable emotion, her narrow dark eyes sparkled beneath her thick fringe.

Taro unfastened the belt of her long leather coat. She slid it from her shoulders and placed it neatly over the back of a chair. Aside from her shiny black stiletto-heeled shoes, she was completely naked. She selected a scalpel from the table. Its pristine blade flashed coldly between her slender fingers. The tattoos on her back, buttocks and thighs rippled like the skin of an exotic reptile as she moved gracefully across the floor.

Tanaka tried to scream, feeling the cold kiss of surgical steel as the scalpel entered his flesh. The knife glided effortlessly through layers of skin and cartilage as she sliced off his right ear. She held it between the thumb and forefinger of her left hand.

High up in the darkness the fluttering of invisible wings intensified. Suddenly a large, black shape swooped down. An enormous raven descended on outstretched wings towards Taro. It snatched the severed ear from between her fingers, and fluttered across the room. The raven landed on the table where Haiku remained seated. Indifferent to Haiku’s presence, the bird began to eat the ear. Haiku watched, obviously fascinated.

Taro made a deep incision along Tanaka’s torso, the scalpel unzipping his skin from navel to collarbone. Blood pumped from the wound. It streamed down his body, a bright scarlet shroud. Taro took a few steps back. Blood spattered her forearms, breasts and abdomen. It ran down the shallow chasm of her cleavage, exploring the erotic topography of her body. The metallic fragrance underscored the smells of gasoline, anthracite and molten tar.

The smell of blood aroused the carrion birds roosting in the darkness. They beat their powerful wings, squawking hoarsely. And then they began to descend. At first they were cautious, tentative. A few landed on Tanaka's body. They made exploratory bites, their hooked beaks tugging at his tender flesh. His obvious helplessness—the sweet nectar of his blood—emboldened them. They began tearing at the raw laceration Taro had inflicted, ripping away flaps of skin, hacking off morsels of yellow fat. Tanaka's body twisted helplessly, swinging from side to side on the sturdy rope that suspended him above the enormous cauldron of smouldering tar.

And then, all at once, the remaining birds swept down from the rafters.

They swooped on Tanaka, a whirlwind of black feathers engulfing his helpless body. The Bellini aria continued to play. Its sublime melody merged with the harsh cries of the ravens, the sounds of tearing flesh and thrashing wings. A feeding frenzy of hellish proportions ensued. It was as if the forces of darkness had assumed physical form: the apocalyptic vision of a crazed evangelist.

Taro and Haiku watched silently.

After a time, Taro walked over to the chair where she'd left her long black leather coat. She reached into the pocket and retrieved a 9mm semi-automatic Glock 21 handgun. Holding the gun casually in her right hand, she pointed it at the ceiling and fired three times. The sharp retorts reverberated like a series of explosions. Startled by the abrupt violence of the gunshots, the ravens scattered.

Tanaka was dead. His body had become unrecognisable, a mutilated effigy. Bulging tubes of exposed viscera dangled from his ruptured abdomen. The raw entrails hung across his narrow chest, touching his chin. There was a gaping hole where his genitals had once been. His face had been flayed. Darkness filled the hollow eye sockets.

Taro walked to the hand-operated winch that held Tanaka's corpse in place above the drum. Gripping the handle firmly she began to turn it, slowly lowering his body. Little by little, she immersed his remains in the scalding black liquid. A new odour complemented the smells of gasoline, coal and tar.

The stench of cooking, human flesh.

Chapter Seven

The Neon Inferno

There were some areas in Tokyo one would not find marked on any map. Slums. The authorities preferred to pretend they didn't even exist. Maldorado was the worst of them. It wasn't simply a bad neighbourhood. It was a cancer. If Tokyo was a modern hell, then Maldorado occupied its deepest circle.

The Neon Inferno.

As Inspector Sakamoto drove through the narrow streets of Maldorado, sheets of cold, grey rain began to fall. Acid rain. Over the years as a senior investigator with Department Z, Sakamoto had come to know this labyrinthine maze intimately. Life was cheap here; murder an everyday occurrence. Crime had reached epidemic proportions. Thinking about this, Sakamoto remembered Dr Yamaguchi's theories of cultural dissonance and social psychopathology. He found it easy to sympathise with the suicidal psychiatrist's analogy of an infectious disease rotting the very core of civilised society. Here, in Maldorado, the prognosis was terminal. The best Sakamoto and his colleagues in Department Z could do was enforce a strict quarantine of the entire area.

Maldorado?

That wasn't its real name, of course. It was—or at least seemed to be—street slang. Its precise origins remained obscure. The slum had become largely colonised by Brazilian immigrants of Japanese ancestry, the returning descendants of expatriates who'd grown disillusioned with the South American Dream. Sakamoto assumed the name reflected an ironic inversion of *Eldorado*. The fabled city of gold had lured many greedy conquistadors to their doom, minds unhinged by topical fevers and avaricious dreams of Aztec plunder. It reminded Sakamoto of a poem he'd once read or heard—when or where, he couldn't recall.

And o'er his heart a shadow

Fell as he found

No spot of ground

That looked like Eldorado

The place was located on the north-eastern edge of the city beyond the Minami-Senju Station. This was a slum area dating back to the Edo period, known as San'ya. The origins of San'ya could be traced to the days of the strict caste system. According to mythology, the Demons' Gate, the point where evil spirits entered the city, was located here. The city's *hinin*—the lowest caste—were made to live in this area and perform all the allegedly 'unclean' forms of labour, such as butchery and the curing of skins, which were forbidden by the Buddhist faith. That way the wealthy could have their meat and leather, leaving the *inhumans* with the guilt of blood on their hands alone.

Members of the lower classes had also been forced to behead, crucify and incinerate over two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand criminals during that time. The brutalisation of the *hinin* was a systematic programme deliberately orchestrated by the administrators of the ruling *shogunate*. It guaranteed that the *untouchables* became the object of universal disgust and revulsion. The district itself was deemed a *buraku*: an unclean area quite literally cursed thanks to the squalid activities of the social outcasts who dwelt there.

It was a prejudice that persisted to this day.

When he arrived at the scene, Sakamoto noticed two squad cars and a couple of unmarked vehicles parked in the street outside the abandoned building. Strobing blue and red lights illuminated the darkness, casting bright reflections in the deep puddles that gathered on the potholed road. A couple of uniformed officers sheltered in the doorway of the derelict factory. Sakamoto got out of the car, pulled the collar of his raincoat up, and briskly jogged across the sidewalk. When he reached the door, he flashed his credentials to the two young cops who saluted formally.

The interior of the derelict factory was in almost total darkness. A few naked light bulbs hung from the ceiling. Flashlight beams danced chaotically over the walls and floor, the rusted heaps of ancient machinery. The intermittent eruptions of a camera flash sputtered like a miniature lightning storm. Three plainclothes members of Department Z, accompanied by a photographer, had beaten Sakamoto to the scene.

Violent crime and murder were commonplace in Maldorado. Homicides were

left for the local police to deal with. They were seldom investigated in any meaningful way. The cops down here simply tidied up the aftermath of murder. They were garbage men.

The fact the local police had put in a call to Department Z could mean only one thing. This was no run-of-the-mill killing. Sakamoto had realised that from the moment he'd entered the building. One thing had alerted him to that fact immediately.

The music.

A classical theme reverberated through the cavernous interior of the building. Sakamoto was no expert. He knew next to nothing about music. But he recognised *opera* when he heard it. *An aria*, Sakamoto realised. *Yes, that's what it was called.*

"Pretty damn weird, eh, sir?"

Sakamoto was distracted from his silent contemplation of the scene. Sergeant Murakami, a young officer in his late twenties, recently seconded to Department Z, was standing by his shoulder, flashlight in hand.

"Nice music, though," Murakami added, indulging in a little gallows humour.

Sakamoto said nothing.

Gallows humour?

Under the circumstances it was actually rather appropriate.

The victim had been hanged.

Upside down.

Sakamoto had seen this—or something very like it—before. Recently. But for the moment, he decided to keep that to himself. He simply turned to the younger man and said, "C'mon, Murakami, let's take a closer look."

The body was suspended above a large metal drum, which was scorched black. Murakami shone his flashlight inside. The drum contained a large quantity of tar. It was cold now, having dried to a thick, gluey consistency. The dead embers of the fire pit beneath it had been reduced to charcoal. The beam of Murakami's flashlight moved upwards, incrementally displaying the body's injuries.

Congeaed tar coated the body. Dozens of sleek, black feathers adhered to it. Sakamoto suddenly noticed the flapping of invisible wings, high up in the darkness. Murakami shone his flashlight at the ceiling, running the beam along the exposed

rafters. Sakamoto glimpsed several large, black birds crowded together on a rusted girder. Caught in the spotlight, they took flight, beating their powerful wings as they flitted away into the shadows. Their coarse voices interrupted the evocative beauty of the aria, which played on a continuous loop.

A deep incision ran the length of the body's torso, from the navel to the shallow recess between the collarbones just below the Adam's apple. Caked with tar and feathers, the intestinal organs bulged from the ruptured body cavity. The genitalia were gone. *The birds had obviously devoured the penis and testes*, Sakamoto realised.

The condition of the body and the nature of its injuries weren't just horrific. They were downright bizarre. But something else troubled Sakamoto deeply: the deliberate *positioning* of the corpse. The rope tied around the victim's left ankle, the right leg bent at a ninety-degree angle and tied behind the left knee: Sakamoto had seen this before. It was more than simple *déjà vu*. As he contemplated the problem, a sudden burst of camera flashes attracted his attention.

Sakamoto turned and called over to the photographer, snapping away at something on a nearby table. "What've you got there?" he asked.

"Uh, I think it's something you should see, sir," the photographer replied.

Sakamoto walked across the floor. What he saw on the table struck him with the force of a thunderbolt. A single sheet of white rice paper was inscribed with a simple verse—a *haiku*—executed in the style of traditional calligraphy. The similarity to the *hara-kiri haiku* discovered at the scene of Dr Yamaguchi's suicide was inescapable.

Deep into darkness

Peering. I stood wondering,

Doubting and fearing

"Shit," Sakamoto muttered. "What in the hell is going on here—?"

"Is there something wrong, sir?" the photographer asked, a little surprised by Sakamoto's grave expression, the obvious tension in his voice.

"Yes. There is definitely something wrong." Sakamoto turned to another plainclothes officer loitering nearby. "Hey, you there," he said, indicating the sheet of rice paper. "I want this tagged and bagged right now. Get it down to Forensics. I don't care what they've got on—or how busy they are. This gets top priority, right?"

I want it to get the works: spectroscopic analysis, DNA testing. Everything. Understand?”

The plainclothes man nodded curtly. He slipped on a pair of white, rubber surgical gloves, lifted the sheet of rice paper and dropped it into a clear plastic evidence bag.

“You, come with me,” said Sakamoto, addressing the photographer. He gestured at the body. “I want more pictures of this. Don’t leave anything out.”

The congealed tar and feathers gleamed in the stuttering light of the camera flash. The stroboscopic effect created the illusion of movement. Suddenly Sakamoto realised something. It was not just an illusion. The body *was* moving. Violent activity disturbed the exposed innards. The ruined viscera squirmed like a nest of bloated snakes. Sakamoto stepped back instinctively. For a split-second an insane thought occurred to him.

The victim is still alive!

Suddenly, the wriggling entrails exploded outwards. Four large ravens burst from inside the gaping body cavity, their wings weighted down with the putrid residue of an obscene feast. Flapping awkwardly, they struggled to gain altitude. Reeling with fright, the photographer continued shooting, capturing the entire, grisly spectacle.

“Son of a bitch!” Murakami exclaimed. He tried to appear nonchalant. But the colour had drained from his face. The photographer had turned green. He struggled with the urge to throw up, but failed. Bending over, he retched noisily.

Sakamoto walked over to the body. His thoughts were racing. Just what had he stumbled into here?

As if reading his mind, Murakami sidled up to Sakamoto. “In all your time with the Department, sir,” he asked, sounding slightly awestruck, “can you honestly say you’ve ever seen *anything* like this before?”

“Yes, I have seen something like this,” Sakamoto replied without hesitation.

“What? Here in Maldorado? It must be an old case, huh?”

“Not here. It was in Yanaka. And it was less than a week ago.”