

ZENTROPOLIS

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PHASE

I

Chapter One

An Angel of the Abyss

Marukido Sada pilots the geist-scythe through the icy gulfs of the Pacific night sky. Remote and silent, she glides above the chaotic landscape—a solitary bird of prey. Random thermal currents inflate the geist-scythe’s slender metallic sails like the razor-sharp wings of an elegant steel mosquito. Behind her, the glittering vistas of Zentropolis fade into the distance: a neon mirage shimmering on the horizon. Directly ahead, the watchtowers of the fortified sea-wall loom into view. Marukido adjusts the aerofoils and rudder. The geist-scythe climbs steeply. A customised stealth model based on the standard hang-glider design, its sleek black canopy defies radar detection and—under cover of night—is practically invisible to the naked eye. It whispers above the castellated parapet as Marukido negotiates the slipstream. The sentries manning the gun-turrets maintain their vigil, unaware that an elusive phantom has encroached upon their territory. Marukido soars beyond their reach, an angel of the abyss embracing the endless darkness.

As the geist-scythe continues its vertiginous ascent, Marukido glances down at the ocean. Its cold, ink-black depths are treacherous. Toxic. The sluggish currents evoke the eerie calm of the Sargasso Sea, the historic graveyard of Spanish galleons, their cavernous holds fatally laden with the lustrous ballast of Aztec plunder. A watery wilderness of death.

A series of islands emerges from the gloom. It resembles an ominous aggregation of pagan monoliths, the ruins of an ancient civilisation engulfed by an apocalyptic deluge. The Akashita Atoll. These sombre promontories have become the vicious fiefdom of the Hyakki Yagyo, the tribal gangs who control the thriving criminal economy that dominates the area. Though separated from the brilliant capital of Zentropolis by no more than two-hundred kilometres and the formidable obstacle of the heavily-armed and fortified sea-wall, the society of the Hyakki Yagyo belongs to a different epoch—a time of lawless barbarity.

The name itself—Hyakki Yagyo—is traditionally associated with the Night Parade of One Hundred Demons, a ghostly procession comparable to the belief in the

Wild Hunt once prevalent in medieval Europe. Idiomatically the expression implies ‘pandaemonium’ or ‘an innumerable horde’, applied to the most frightening and malevolent species of *yokai* once reputed to plague the rivers, shorelines, mountains and forests of rural Japan. Encouraging its current usage, the remote oligarchs who rule Zentropolis have *literally* demonized the population of the Akashita Atoll.

Before the Ialdaboath Incident ravaged the land and transformed it beyond recognition, the area had once supported vast rice paddies and fertile oceanic lagoons where a wide variety of edible seaweed was cultivated. The ancestors of those modern agricultural-workers—the superstitious peasantry of a long-vanished Japan—believed a fearsome *yokai* known as the Akashita stalked their water-logged farms and modest homesteads in search of human prey. The belief no longer persisted. But the *name* had stuck. And these days *genuine* monsters prowled the Akashita Atoll—demons far more real and lethal than the legendary ‘red tongue’ consigned long ago to the nebulous realms of folklore and fantasy.

The geist-scythe descends gradually as Marukido manipulates the controls with expert precision. The hostile islands rise up to greet her like the monumental ramparts of a haunted mausoleum protruding from the depths of a sunken necropolis. Immense bonfires burn on some—the sacrificial pyres of a savage religion. Marukido skirts the vivid beacons like a nocturnal death’s head moth wisely resisting the fatal allure of a naked flame. Whatever their true purpose, the fires—and the ugly excrescences of barren rock they illuminate—mean nothing to Marukido. She has penetrated the baleful airspace of the Akashita Atoll with a single goal in mind.

Nothing will distract her.

Avoiding a diseased coral reef that thrusts twenty metres above the sullen black waves like a wall of daggers threatening the heavens, Marukido steers the geist-scythe across a wide expanse of open water. Though far deeper here—beyond the shallow inlets and channels that surround the island network like a labyrinthine moat—the ocean remains calm. Deceptively calm.

Untold tonnes of toxic waste, heavy metals and radioactive isotopes contaminated the waters long ago—much of it the result of unregulated industrial pollution that continued for decades before the devastating effects of the Rapture Wars and the global catastrophe of the Ialdaboath Incident took their irrevocable toll.

But Marukido knows that *other* dangers lurk just below the surface.

Lethal poisons may have decimated the natural fauna and flora that once thrived here. But new species evolved to replace them. The obscene cocktail of chemical and biological effluents—catalysed by the slow nuclear decay of plutonium-239, caesium-137 and strontium-90—spawned a grotesque bestiary of strange mutants that rapidly assumed sovereignty of the sea. These nameless monsters prowl the depths with the insatiable appetites of voracious predators. But Marukido isn't afraid—even as the geist-scythe swoops low, practically skimming the water. Controlling her emotions with the discipline of a Zen *sensei*, she remains focused on her goal.

And then—all at once—it confronts her.

The *Kurotokage Maru* emerges from a low fog bank, the opaque vapours imbued with a spectral glow. The immense silhouette of the colossal hulk coalesces gradually like a sinister ghost ship, a grim harbinger of disaster. The sheer scale of the vessel is vast. Intimidating. Comparable to the gargantuan tankers that once navigated the sea-lanes when the world still depended upon long-since exhausted deposits of oil and natural gas, the *Kurotokage Maru* relies on an archaic—but nonetheless effective—method of propulsion. Steam. Three tall chimney-stacks tower above the deck, expelling columns of noxious smoke into the atmosphere. A brace of rotary paddles located a-midships—port and starboard respectively—drive the iron-clad's laborious progress. Their rusted metal blades churn the putrid black water like giant treadmills ploughing through molasses.

Gun emplacements situated at the bow and stern are equipped with both medium and heavy artillery. Their formidable ordnance enables the *Kurotokage Maru* to dominate the Akashita Atoll. The vessel resembles a curious hybrid of a Mississippi riverboat and an obsolete dreadnought, a clumsy sledgehammer created to bludgeon the opposition. In stark contrast, Marukido Sada is a scalpel designed to deliver a forensic surgical strike—the elegantly fatal *coup de grâce*.

Marukido adjusts the controls once more. The geist-scythe ascends vertically, gathering speed. And then it hovers silently, circling above the *Kurotokage Maru* as the armoured leviathan trudges portentously through the waves. Built for neither speed nor manoeuvrability, the vessel is a sitting target, its crew unaware of Marukido's presence. Marukido activates the autopilot, programming the geist-

scythe to track the ship's course. Then she unfastens the harness that holds her in place, relinquishes her grip on the glider's guide bar.

And falls.

The wind clutches greedily at Marukido. The ankle length trench-coat she wears billows around her body like a pair of glossy black wings. The coat is composed of neoplastic-Kevlar. The material exhibits the appearance and flexibility of lightweight latex, but has been designed to withstand the ballistic impact of conventional firearms utilising a wide variety of ammunition: hollow points, Teflon-magnesium rounds and even flechettes. Marukido also wears a skintight black catsuit composed of the same fabric. The garment accentuates every subtle curve and contour of her lithe physique whilst simultaneously rendering her largely invulnerable to most of the weaponry customarily deployed by members of the Hyakki Yagyo. Knee-length black boots; a broad belt studded with a series of lethal *shuriken*; and a pair of fingerless black gloves complete an ensemble that seems both fashionably chic and eminently practical. Her sleek black hair, symmetrical features, porcelain complexion and large turquoise eyes imbue Marukido's dramatic appearance with a cachet of feral glamour—simultaneously beguiling and demonic. She resembles a beautiful *yokai* descending from the fearful depths of outer space, an alluring elemental wraith.

From a height of approximately two-hundred feet, Marukido plummets towards the deck of the ship. The central chimney-stack rushes towards her, a vast iron pylon threatening to swat her out of the sky like a fragile bug. Marukido's Psi-fidelity retinal implants calculate the speed and velocity of her descent—the distance from the looming funnel—with split-second accuracy. These highly-sophisticated and specialised prostheses augment Marukido's visual faculties in various innovative ways. Their technical schematics include infra-red, heat-sensitive and digital-enhancement capabilities among other specifications—most notably the ability to access the higher frequencies of the Dharmawave Spectrum via the revolutionary *fractal lens* function, an indispensable aid to the esoteric disciplines of fifth-dimensional astral combat.

Marukido's trench-coat functions like a rudimentary parachute, enabling her to guide her rapid descent parallel to the smoking chimney-stack. Close enough to

touch the immense metal cylinder, she skilfully avoids colliding with it. A maintenance ladder extends the entire length of the funnel. Reaching out with her right hand, Marukido grabs onto a rusted iron rung. Her body jackknifes violently as her downward trajectory comes to an abrupt halt. The chimney-stack reverberates like a gigantic bell as her heels slam against its rivet-studded hide. Under normal circumstances anybody attempting such a foolhardy manoeuvre would literally tear the arm from its socket.

But Marukido Sada is far from normal.

As the sole surviving exponent of the highly-classified Project Equinox—a radical neugenics program hatched at the height of the Rapture Wars—Marukido Sada possesses the ability to consciously regulate her metabolism: moderating body temperature, heart-rate and respiration, as well as managing the production of various enzymes, hormones and neurotransmitters. She can also control the bone density of her skeleton which is augmented with a liquid ceramic alloy designed and implanted by the directors of Project Equinox—Dr. Seikichi Sato and Dr. Akemi Adachi—utilising principles and techniques no other scientist has subsequently managed to fully comprehend or replicate. Muscle-mass can be increased correspondingly, tendons and sinews acquiring the proportionate strength and resilience of high-tensile steel. Consequently Marukido can perform such death-defying feats whilst remaining confident that her deceptively-slender limbs remain securely connected to her body.

No sooner has Marukido grasped the iron rung than she becomes aware of the ferocious heat emanating from the entire structure of the chimney-stack and the maintenance ladder itself. Conveyed from the furnaces that drive the *Kurotokage Maru's* powerful steam turbines, the heat is sufficiently intense to inflict serious fifth- and sixth-degree burns within seconds. But Marukido is immune to such hazards. The molecular structure of her skin incorporates a combination of complex polysaccharide and organo-silicate compounds. They are suspended like the strands of an intricate sub-cutaneous tapestry between flexible layers of a versatile epidermal laminate cultivated in the secret laboratories Sato and Adachi established at a remote location known as Faculty 23. Marukido can re-organise the pattern at will, altering its structure to replicate the chitinous texture of high-grade body armour without

sacrificing her skin's natural elasticity. Should she sustain a cut or laceration of any kind, the tissues will regenerate at an accelerated rate, healing most wounds almost instantly. As well as resisting serious—potentially life-threatening—physical injuries, this remarkable ability also provides her with an effective heat shield.

And the cryoplasm that flows through her veins enables Marukido to further compensate for the scorching heat. The mysterious elixir—a curious blood-substitute concocted by the architects of Project Equinox—maintains her body temperature at a constant 37° F. Marukido reduces it to a chilly 30° F. And then begins her descent. Her trench-coat flutters around her shoulders like the cape of an agile vampire as Marukido scurries rapidly down the ladder. By the time she reaches the deck she hasn't sustained so much as a blister. The surface of her skin doesn't even feel warm.

Lingering in the deep shadows cast by the chimney-stacks, Marukido takes a few moments to look around and assess her situation. A couple of look-outs are loitering close-by. Though heavily armed, they appear utterly complacent—smoking and drinking—as they exchange crude jokes and obscene anecdotes in the guttural *patois* spoken by the majority of the Hyakki Yagyo.

On the elevated platform of the flight-deck, adjacent to the gun-turret squatting ominously in the bow, Marukido notices three gyro-jets. Sleek executive models. These rotor-assisted luxury aircraft—status symbols popular among the social elite known as *the domain clique*—look somewhat out-of-place. Uniformed pilots and armed bodyguards maintain a watchful eye over their employers' favourite playthings, ensuring they don't sustain so much as a scratch.

Marukido slips past the lookouts and proceeds towards her destination, encountering no further obstacles. Directly ahead, a heavy iron door that leads to the lower decks remains ajar. A raucous chorus of loud voices—laughter and shouting—echoes from below. Music. The occasional scream.

Time to join the party.

Chapter Two

The *Kurotokage Maru* Sanction

The *Kurotokage Maru* is more than just a steam-driven behemoth prowling the toxic waters that separate the Akashita Atoll from the mainland. It is a floating fortress, the mobile headquarters of the most powerful crime tribe among all the Hyakki Yagyo—the Black Lizard clan. The clan dominates the trade in illegal narcotics, human trafficking, prostitution and black market arms dealing. Its members are notorious for their ruthlessness and cruelty—feared and hated by the other gangs operating in the area. And the Black Lizard clan itself is subject to the absolute authority of its autocratic leader, the formidable Madam Moloch, a despotic matriarch who rules her vicious empire with an iron fist. Her harsh regime inspires unquestioning loyalty and obedience—even a perverse kind of *love*—among her followers. Those familiar with Madam Moloch’s fearsome reputation justifiably describe her as *a force not be reckoned with—but avoided at all costs*.

Marukido Sada has long been aware of the activities of the Black Lizard clan and the litany of crimes attributed to Madam Moloch. Though she gives the orders, the clan leader has never hesitated to bloody her *own* claws. She has been personally implicated in a catalogue of atrocities remarkable for their spectacular brutality. Few would be so reckless as to violate the territory of the Black Lizard clan. They regard any incursion as an act of war—and respond accordingly. An intruder can expect no mercy. Only death. A slow, lingering—unimaginably painful—death.

Before accepting the *Kurotokage Maru* sanction—the opaque jargon of the Threshold Protocols euphemistically describes assassination and other sensitive covert actions as *sanctions*—Marukido weighed the risks carefully. She appreciates the danger. But as an experienced operative—a seasoned veteran of the Rapture Wars—she remains confident that she can complete the mission with the lethal efficiency that has become her professional trademark.

The sanction has been authorised by Misaki Fujiwara, Executive-Elect of the High Zaibatsu’s Supreme Directorate. The remuneration is generous, of course. Marukido would have expected nothing less. However, the fact that Fujiwara—

effectively the *dictator* of Zentropolis—has chosen to become personally involved in the matter clearly indicates the gravity of the situation.

According to intelligence reports, a Code Mauve Threshold Violation has occurred in the vicinity of the Akashita Atoll. The *Kurotokage Maru* has been identified as the most likely source. And the Threshold Protocols remain unequivocal as to the precise nature of the appropriate response. Once ratified, a sanction can never be revoked. It must be implemented. With extreme prejudice.

Chapter Three

An Elect Chosen by God

The main deck of the *Kurotokage Maru* encompasses an area comparable to the cavernous holds of the nuclear-powered aircraft-carriers that once imposed the vicious will of long-vanished Superpowers upon a world too frightened and divided to resist their imperial ambitions. But there the similarity ends. The *Kurotokage Maru* does not house the genocidal cargoes historically deployed by monstrous tyrants with the blind devotion of a sinister doomsday cult—psychopathic zealots obsessively rehearsing the obscene rituals of Armageddon. Instead, its monumental dimensions suggest the rococo splendour of an idolatrous cathedral, complete with ornate colonnades, complex mosaics and colourful murals—an extravagant pleasure palace dedicated to the celebration of excess.

The immense space has been divided into three capacious mezzanine levels whose design suggests the architecture of a classical amphitheatre. The broad terraces rise majestically above a vast sunken pool located on the ground floor of the main concourse. Various stalls and enclosed booths have been erected along the balconies where a considerable crowd has gathered, casually browsing among the various wares on display. Resplendent in gang colours and symbolic insignia, members of the Black Lizard clan swagger like arrogant peacocks among a motley congregation of civilians. The latter group is composed primarily of locals—inhabitants of the Akashita Atoll—designated Hyakki Yagyo by default though not directly affiliated to any clan.

A third party, far smaller in number—and all the more conspicuous—includes members of the domain clique. Personal bodyguards—armed with powerful weapons and uniformly attired in designer business suits like corporate salarymen—accompany them. More than a match for any truculent member of the Hyakki Yagyo, these keen-eyed killers—recruited from crack special forces units—maintain a watchful eye on the proceedings. As the privileged scions of high society, members of the domain clique enjoy lives of shameless luxury in Tengoku-town, the most salubrious and exclusive district in all Zentropolis. These are the spoiled and

pampered children of the High Zaibatsu's Supreme Directorate. They will inherit the reins of power and assume governance of Zentropolis—just as the *daimyo* of feudal Japan did centuries earlier. The title *Executive-Elect* does not refer to the redundant conventions of parliamentary democracy, but to the concept of a political, economic—and implicitly *spiritual*—elite entitled to rule by divine right.

An Elect chosen by God.

In the meantime, however, the domain clique spend their abundant leisure time in pursuit of decadent self-indulgence. Their jaded appetites require constant stimulation. Novelty.

And nothing excites them more than *slumming*.

Merging with the crowd, Marukido follows several members of the domain clique. She maintains a discreet distance, careful not to alert the bodyguards. The presence of these cosseted bluebloods presents Marukido with a problem. Though she anticipates completing her mission successfully, the nature of the action will inevitably incur collateral damage. Significant collateral damage. The governing elite of the High Zaibatsu are completely indifferent to the fate of the Hyakki Yagyo. Should one—or a million—die; it makes no difference to them.

But the *domain clique*? That would be an entirely different matter.

Marukido finds it strange that Fujiwara and his staff should have authorised this operation without first ensuring that members of their own class were not exposed to any danger. Could such precautions have compromised security and risked alerting the real targets to the imminent action? Or might it be an oversight—a simple case of incompetence? Either way, Marukido's instructions are clear. The Threshold Protocols explicitly prohibit her from aborting the sanction. And neither do they permit her to warn the domain clique or their bodyguards.

It looks like they've chosen the wrong night to take a walk on the wild side, Marukido decides. Still, they can rely on their goons to protect them. And the gyrojets she noticed earlier—perched like elegant steel raptors on the ship's flight deck—will provide a more-than-adequate escape route. It seems likely that the domain clique will survive. And why not? They always do.

Which is more than can be said of the *Kurotokage Maru* itself.

While Marukido contemplates the situation, the domain clique brats loiter by a

stall that tempts prospective customers with a veritable smorgasbord of mind-bending narcotics. The selection includes Hex-Z, Amok, Psychrome and Adrenazine, potent synthetics processed in the Khem-labs situated on the lower levels of the ship. More exotic substances such as Manta Red and Void—organic compounds derived from the glandular secretions of the mutated fish and poisonous seaweed that thrive in the waters around the Akashita Atoll—are also for sale.

Marukido walks up to the stall where the pampered aristocrats have gathered, laughing and chattering incoherently, their voices loud and obnoxious. Sensing the hostile scrutiny of the security detail, she feigns interest in the merchandise and adopts the nonchalant demeanour of a streetwise hustler; her gamine physique, punky haircut and slinky costume reinforce the impression. The charade reassures the bodyguards that she poses no threat to their entitled clients. They don't suspect the array of deadly weapons she artfully conceals about her person.

Remaining in character, Marukido purchases several capsules of Hex-Z, a neo-psychedelic she uses recreationally on a regular basis. Its synaesthetic effects enhance her appreciation of music and the visual arts—one of the few drugs compatible with the cryoplasm flowing through her veins. Completing the transaction, she studies the privileged youngsters rifling through the pedlar's wares. A brash young woman attracts her attention—clearly the ringleader of the pack.

The domain clique's Alpha Bitch.

Marukido observes surreptitiously as the Alpha Bitch haggles over the price of a large flask containing a potent concentrate of Manta Red. She seems completely unaware of the fact that even a small dose would prove instantly fatal to a dilettante such as herself. The Alpha Bitch wears a knee-length silver fox-fur coat over a short, figure-hugging dress composed of a sheer incandescent fabric that emphasises her shapely hips and thighs. An ornate star-sapphire necklace gilds the sensual cleavage of her surgically-enhanced décolletage. The cold blue gemstones glitter suggestively. And her full lips are painted a carnal shade of red. The precise colour of blood.

Chapter Four

Madam Moloch's Compendium of Carnal Curiosities

The bustling terraces of the *Kurotokage Maru's* main deck resemble a chaotic synthesis of colliding cultures, a riotous pageant invoking the flamboyant spectres of dead civilisations, long-forgotten and consigned to the abyssal depths of collective amnesia. A carnival atmosphere prevails, suggesting the decadent excesses of a diabolical Mardi Gras. Or the Medina district of Hell.

Stalls selling handmade talismans and amulets—the grotesque icons and fetishes associated with the barbaric religious cults that thrive in the savage wilderness of the Akashita Atoll—compete with garishly-painted booths advertising perverse burlesques and other more baroque forms of erotic entertainment. These depraved sideshows exercise a powerful allure over the pornographic imaginations of Madam Moloch's customers. The domain clique especially. As the bacchanal continues, the revellers discard their inhibitions with reckless abandon. A psychotropic fog pervades the lascivious atmosphere like profane incense. Nothing is off-limits.

No taboo respected.

But then a stern announcement from the PA system calls a halt to the spontaneous debauch. The time has come for the highlight of the festivities—the spectacular *pièce de résistance*.

Madam Moloch's Compendium of Carnal Curiosities.

Rows of tiered benches have been erected in a wide circle surrounding the immense sunken pool that dominates the floor. The seating arrangements resemble the bleachers once commonly featured at long-defunct sporting fixtures such as baseball or basketball. A tall dais stands at one end of the concourse, the covered platform draped with the gang colours and pagan insignia of the Black Lizard clan. It resembles the podium traditionally occupied by the medieval dignitaries who presided over the tourneys where knights tested their martial prowess with lance, mace and broadsword. But the similarity is purely superficial. The displays of chivalric combat celebrated in the romantic epics of Sir Thomas Malory and Wolfram von Eschenbach have no place aboard the *Kurotokage Maru*. Such heroic

ideals mean nothing to Madam Moloch and her guests.

This audience craves an entirely different kind of violence.

The spectators cram the bleachers, packed tightly together. The effects of the drugs, alcohol and other intoxicants they've consumed are clearly apparent. They jostle for position, eager to secure the best possible view of the imminent proceedings. And then just as the audience's patience appears to reach its limit—minor scuffles and skirmishes breaking out here and there—a discordant fanfare erupts from the PA system. The audience knows what it means.

The ceremony is about to begin.

Madam Moloch makes her entrance, displaying a flair for the dramatic that suggests a natural affinity with the flamboyant tyrants of ancient Rome—extravagant narcissists infamous for their shameless exhibitionism. As if on cue, an explosion of rapturous applause greets her arrival. But no encouragement is necessary. The audience responds spontaneously. Many among the Hyakki Yagyo revere Madam Moloch as if she were a genuine divinity. And the members of the domain clique who patronise her vicious soirées consider her a fascinating monstrosity.

But neither understand who—or what *kind* of monster—Madam Moloch truly is.

Madam Moloch reclines on a luxurious sedan chair sumptuously adorned with radiant silk and glittering brocade. Gossamer veils of colourful chiffon drape its tall canopy, enhancing the aura of sinister mystery she deliberately cultivates. Four imposing eunuchs—blind and sexless giants, surgically mutilated in the forensic dungeons of the Plasmatoria located on the deepest levels of the *Kurotokage Maru*—support the majestic conveyance. Condemned to eternal darkness, the eunuchs proceed with the stately grace of a solemn funeral cortège, never faltering or missing a step. They respond metabolically to Madam Moloch's telepathic commands, their brains and central nervous systems tuned to the precise frequency of her will. The naked eunuchs' broad torsos and muscular thighs shimmer with chitinous scales. These cold-blooded *golems* exude the brilliant incandescence of gilded reptiles, glittering in the dramatic stage lighting that strobes across the arena.

Madam Moloch's glamorous entourage—beautiful courtesans, dancers and mimes resplendent in symbolic costumes—includes a phalanx of the Black Lizard clan's lethal elite. The upper echelons of her private army wear black body armour

embellished with silver insignia and demonic masks inspired by the stylistic conventions of *No* theatre. A formidable Praetorian guard.

The gilded procession reaches the dais. Assisted by two of her seductive handmaids, Madam Moloch disembarks from the sedan chair and assumes her place as Mistress of Ceremonies, ensconced upon a black onyx throne upholstered in plush red velvet. She wears an exquisite gown of shimmering black satin embroidered with brilliant obsidian sequins. Scintillating with tiny jewels, a black chiffon veil obscures her features. The face none are permitted to see. At times her movements seem awkward—ungainly—suggesting a physical disability she strives to conceal. But nobody notices. Whatever she is trying to hide, the mob doesn't care. She beguiles them with the ease of a consummate witch. An adroit impresario, she instinctively knows her audience—their needs. Their perversions. And precisely how to *satisfy* them. Her bulbous, amber-coloured eyes transfix the congregation with the pitiless regard of a cold-blooded predator. Gloating.

The crowd breathes as one. A sense of anticipation energises the oppressive atmosphere.

Showtime.

The vast sunken pool that dominates the main deck's central concourse is connected via a network of flooded tunnels to a number of holding tanks beneath the floor. These enclosures house a variety of exotic creatures, the stars of the bizarre spectacle known to the initiated as Madam Moloch's Compendium of Carnal Curiosities. The set-up bears more than a passing resemblance to the sophisticated method of stage-management devised by the organisers of the imperial Roman games. The emperors employed skilled architects and engineers to create an elaborate warren of cages and elevators—designed to house and convey the wild beasts and prisoners destined to die for the mob's morbid amusement—beneath the arena itself. A sterling example of sadistic ingenuity.

During the reigns of perverse despots such as Claudius, Nero and Caligula, the arena was frequently flooded in order to stage ghastly pantomimes of ritualised slaughter in which helpless slaves were sacrificed to savage Nile crocodiles or enraged hippopotami. Though historically famous for gladiatorial combat, the Circus Maximus regularly hosted such macabre holocausts—choreographed

bloodbaths cynically conceived and calculated to appease the crowd's basest instincts. These degrading tableaux of unrestrained violence included women dragged to death or torn apart by teams of bulls; boys sexually assaulted and murdered by men dressed as satyrs; girls tied to stakes and raped by adult chimpanzees made drunk on wine. And even these atrocities were often just the *supporting acts* designed to sustain the spectators' interest between the main events.

Their passion for *mythology*—stories describing how the gods often assumed the form of an animal in order to seduce a mortal woman—inspired the Romans to embrace the *nadir* of perversion and mount public displays of wanton bestiality. Similarly intrigued, Madam Moloch has turned to the legends of rural Japan when it comes to creating her own unique entertainments.

Tonight's program includes a vivid recreation of the scenario depicted in Utamaro's renowned classic, *Beauty Ravished by Kappa*. This startling woodblock print shows a young woman dragged to the bottom of a river by two *kappas*—the amphibious *yokais* believed to resemble anthropomorphic salamanders—and raped while a second young woman remains stranded on a small outcrop of rock. The fragile sanctuary appears short-lived as the tide is clearly rising. The helpless spectator observes her companion's plight in horror, anticipating the fate that will shortly befall her also. In *Beauty Ravished by Kappa*—a prime example of the pornographic *shunga* style popularised during the Edo period—Utamaro skilfully combines a subversive element of erotic provocation with a frisson of terror and impending doom. A potent cocktail of sex and death.

Eager to maximise its sensational potential, Madam Moloch has elaborated upon Utamaro's original scenario. A group of twelve young women—victims of the Black Lizard clan's human trafficking operation, chosen for their remarkable beauty and obvious innocence—has been deposited on an artificial island at the centre of the vast, water-filled tank. The girls wear revealing costumes, designed to enhance their youthful figures. For a time nothing happens as the girls remain transfixed in the beams of theatrical spotlights, subject to the leering scrutiny of the crowd.

And then the water begins to *rise*.

The temporary refuge is vanishing steadily beneath the water's churning surface. But it does not sink completely—just enough to ensure that the girls must crowd

closely together as the encroaching tide engulfs the tiny island. They jostle awkwardly for position, facing the very real prospect of having to fight each other in order to maintain a precarious foothold. Panic sets in. A few fall into the water, shrieking hysterically—much to the prurient amusement of the crowd.

At pre-arranged signal, the *kappas* are released from their pens.

These neugenically-engineered chimeras bear a striking resemblance to the priapic monsters Utamaro depicted in his timeless masterpiece. The green-skinned hybrids move through the water with bewildering speed and agility, swimming towards the beleaguered promontory where the girls cower and scream in speechless terror. Those already splashing about in the water are naturally first to fall foul of the grotesque amphibians.

There are four *kappas* in total. The numerical disparity between predators and prey guarantees that the torment is prolonged. The drama *intensified*. The audience cheers, whoops and applauds as the scaly devils slither up onto the island and haul the struggling girls into the water, tearing at their clothes to expose pert white breasts and slender thighs. Underwater cameras located throughout the entire depth of the tank convey every aspect of the action to large, hi-definition screens erected along the main concourse of the *Kurotokage Maru*. Though they prefer to violate their victims whilst fully submerged, the *kappas* return continually to the surface. This enables the girls to snatch a few desperate breaths, before their cruel suitors dive once more to indulge their insatiable lust. This specific manoeuvre—neurologically programmed by the ritual's choreographers—ensures that the girls do not drown *too* quickly. That would only spoil the effect of the spectacle.

But inevitably, of course, they all die.

Once the *kappas* have finished with them, the corpses are discarded. Face down and naked, they float on the surface like broken mannequins. The crowd remains unmoved by the drama's melancholy aftermath—utterly devoid of empathy—as they anticipate the next item in what promises to be an extravagant program of scheduled obscenities. They watch indifferently as a detail of experienced clan members—charged with duties and responsibilities similar to the *bestiarii* and *venatores* of the Roman arena—retrieves the bodies with grappling hooks. A series of filters and pumps flushes the blood and semen from the water. In almost no time at all it

glistens with the crystalline brilliance of a clear tropical lagoon unsullied by human pollution.

The *kappas*, meanwhile, return obediently to their lair. They have been expertly conditioned—in common with all of Madam Moloch’s Compendium of Carnal Curiosities—to respond to a series of digital commands electronically relayed from the control console operated by the technicians who oversee the logistical aspects of the performance. The device functions almost exactly like a conventional microwave radio transmitter. Instructions are remotely conveyed via a system of microchip implants connected directly to the creatures’ brains and central nervous systems. Madam Moloch’s Compendium of Carnal Curiosities is, in effect, nothing more than a collection of biological robots programmed to perform in a succession of obscene theatrical skits. The strange menagerie can be manipulated to commit acts of rape, torture and murder in response to specific metabolic and synaptic triggers. But otherwise they are devoid of agency or malice. Harmless.

Unless, of course, an unexpected malfunction should occur.

But the thought of *that* has never troubled the vicious hostess or her leering henchmen.

And the entertainment has only just begun.

The next sequence will feature a barge filled with girls dressed as twelfth century court ladies, attacked by giant crustaceans engineered to resemble monstrously-overgrown caricatures of the famous *Heikegani* crabs, traditionally believed to embody the spirits of the Heike samurai killed at the famous sea battle of Dan-no-ura in 1185. The bloody spectacle concludes with the hapless victims being *literally eaten alive*. A real crowd pleaser.

Other attractions include teenage boys seduced and devoured by an irresistible—but lethal—bevy of *nure-onnas*, the so-called ‘wet-women’ who reputedly lay in wait for unwary prey by the banks of rivers and lakes. Most accounts describe the *nure-onnas* as possessing the faces and upper bodies of attractive women with beautiful, long black hair. The legends maintained, however, that their torsos culminated in the tails of enormous serpents and that they utilised their long prehensile tongues to slowly drain the blood from their victims. In a later scenario girls neugenically-adapted to resemble folkloric *ningyos* and *amabies*—Japan’s equivalent of gentle,

pretty mermaids—will be subjected to the ever-popular ordeal of tentacle-rape-torture perpetrated by giant octopi.

And the grand finale will arrive in all its formidable glory when they finally unleash the Akkorokamui—the ultimate beast whose monstrous performances have never been surpassed.

Beneath her glamorous veil, Madam Moloch smiles, anticipating the fun still in store.

Chapter Five

A Code Mauve Threshold Violation

While the festivities continue on the main deck, Marukido Sada seizes the opportunity to slip away and explore the lower levels of the *Kurotokage Maru*. As if literally invisible, she moves undetected through the windowless maze of dimly-lit tunnels and corridors, evading armed guards and regular crew members with consummate ease.

Infiltrating the engine room where muscle-bound stokers toil over blackened furnaces that resemble the sacrificial altars of a primitive religion, she plants a series of limpet micro-mines. The explosives are placed to inflict maximum damage to the boilers and breach the ship's hull below the waterline. Though the micro-mines incorporate a reliable timer-mechanism, Marukido decides to detonate them remotely instead. The information she received during her briefing was vague. But her intuition is telling Marukido that she had better be prepared for anything.

Why?

The answer is simple. The *Kurotokage Maru* sanction has been classified top priority.

A Code Mauve Threshold Violation.

The Protocols define a Threshold Violation as contravening the legislation that proscribes the manufacture, possession or distribution of prohibited technologies, texts or talismans; the trafficking, transportation or *transformation* of human beings by either scientific or occult means; with the express purpose of invoking, communicating with—or *making manifest*—non-terrestrial entities originating from outwith the material plane. Such subversive activities have been deemed as posing a significant threat not only to the safety and security of Zentropolis—but to the continued existence of human life and the literal survival of the planet itself.

The Threshold Protocols enumerate the various dangers these criminal infringements entail in accordance with a strictly-defined colour code. *Yellow* represents a relatively minor violation. At the other end of the spectrum *mauve* indicates the most egregious breach. The Protocols identify the incorporeal

emanations that derive from the Qlithonian Zone as uniquely dangerous.

The *definition* of Code Mauve.

The Qlithonians occupy a parallel dimension beyond the astral frequencies of the Dharmawave Spectrum that define humanity's perception of space and time. Ageless and deathless—lacking physical form—each psychic vibration constitutes an individuated aspect of a vast integrated consciousness: a hive-mind of inconceivable complexity. And yet the Qlithonians *envy* the human condition—the sensual vitality of flesh—and long to savour the carnal pleasures denied them throughout the countless epochs of eternity. And to satisfy their millenarian craving, they require temporal vehicles—compatible vessels—sufficiently evolved and amenable to possession.

Human hosts.

At the height of the Rapture Wars, various adepts and Necrognostic technicians affiliated with one or more of the *rajikura-shukyo* cults, devised the means to grant the Qlithonians access to the material plane and the corporeal forms they desire. They even provided mindless avatars suitable for prolonged occupancy by such malevolent astral parasites—human surrogates horribly modified according to the esoteric techniques of occult eugenics. With the aid of these treacherous collaborators the Qlithonians stood poised on the very brink of a full-scale psychic invasion. In return for their services, the disciples of these sinister death cults anticipated power and privilege—positions of authority—when their masters assumed sovereignty of the earth.

However, obsessed with their monstrous ambitions, those who subscribed to the Necrognostic dogma of *shi-no-sonkei*—death veneration—unwittingly subverted their own doomsday agenda when the Divine Termagaunt attempted to accelerate the process. Blinded by her fiery visions of cosmic annihilation, the insane matriarch unleashed the global catastrophe of the Ialdaboath Incident that brought the Rapture Wars to an abrupt—virtually apocalyptic—conclusion. The Threshold Protocols sealed the agreement that signalled a formal end to the hostilities.

Since the Protocols were signed, a precarious truce has existed between the High Zaibatsu, the governing body of Zentropolis, and the various warring factions. The latter are divided principally into two groups. The first is a loose aggregation of

sects known collectively as *rajikura-shukyo* or ‘radical religions’. It includes such fanatical zealots as the Jazarihaden Sisterhood, the Shrine of the Divine Termagaunt and the Dzyadic Hierarchy of the Archon Ascendant.

The second group is referred to as *henzai-karuto*—‘crime cults’—heirs to the gangland empire once dominated by the now-defunct *yakuza*. Membership of the *henzai-karuto* derives almost exclusively from Hyakki Yagyo immigrants who have abandoned the toxic wilderness of the Akashita Atoll. They have established themselves on the mainland as criminal overlords, based primarily in the dangerous neon inferno of Jigokuville where the *rajikura-shukyo* also flourish.

In many respects both groups—*rajikura-shukyo* and *henzai-karuto*—have much in common. Each commands absolute obedience through the ruthless exercise of terror and intimidation—closed societies governed by the draconian codes of violence and the tribal loyalty of blood. The stability of the uneasy peace depends on the strict adherence of *all* parties to the fundamental tenets of the Threshold Protocols. Recently, however, a hazardous pattern of shifting alliances, bloody betrayals and dramatically-increased tensions erupting between various rival factions has threatened to plunge the entire region back into the chaotic turmoil of all-out war.

But what lies behind this dramatic upsurge in violence, the insidious atmosphere of unrest?

The High Zaibatsu’s Supreme Directorate has amassed sufficient circumstantial evidence to strongly—if not conclusively—indicate that die-hard elements of the *rajikura-shukyo* have embarked upon a covert policy of re-activating their outlawed Necrognostic warfare programs with a view to making a pre-emptive strike against Zentropolis. Their ultimate goal? To shatter the fragile armistice and assume dominance of the entire Pacific Rim. No group or individual has explicitly issued such a threat. But the authorities of Zentropolis are convinced the plot exists.

Although the intelligence reports cannot categorically confirm the identities of the conspirators, they indicate persuasively that Madam Moloch and the Black Lizard clan have been actively collaborating. Their collusion has enabled the renegades to operate with relative impunity in the lawless wilderness of the Akashita Atoll. The *Kurotokage Maru* provides the *rajikura-shukyo* with the perfect mobile

base of operations—an ideal form of camouflage. Or it *had* done. Until now.

Leaving the heat and noise of the engine room behind, Marukido enters the secure complex that incorporates several Khem-labs and Plasmatoria. In the Khem-labs, teams of rogue pharmacologists—colloquially known as *cooks*—are processing vast quantities of a luminous fluid that fills a series of industrial vats, synthesising the various recreational drugs sold throughout the Akashita Atoll and Jigokuville. These mind-bending substances—Hex-Z, Amok, Psychrome and Adrenazine—are also available, albeit discreetly, in even the most up-market districts of Zentropolis, such as Tengoku-town, the opulent playground of the domain clique. The cooks wear sealed hazmat suits and respirators as they handle the mysterious raw material, suggesting an innate toxicity that is fundamentally lethal. A rather *sobering* thought, Marukido reflects ironically.

By contrast, the natural resources processed and refined by the Plasmatoria are considerably less mysterious—though decidedly more macabre. The facilities' primary function is to physically modify the human beings who fall foul of the Black Lizard clan's human trafficking operation. In effect, the victims are literally transformed into *product*—ear-marked like livestock to be mercilessly exploited in the most perverse, degrading and horrific ways imaginable. The surgeons and technicians engaged in this completely unregulated—*though not strictly illegal*—field are unlicensed neugenicists known as Scalpel Bandits. Incredibly, many of these butchers consider themselves the natural heirs to the skilful tattooists of the Edo period who enjoyed the admiration and respect accorded to great artists even though their trade was officially prohibited.

The ghastly incongruity reminds Marukido of Tanizaki's famous story in which a deranged tattooist creates a spider design that exerts a malevolent, supernatural influence over the young woman whose flawless skin bears the cursed motif. She wonders if a simple combination of *irezumi* pigments etched beneath the flesh might really expose one to the danger of possession by a demonic *tatarigami*. If so, then what *other* unforeseen hazards—both physical and spiritual—might lie in store for those subjected to such tortuous forms of surgical mutilation and body-modification at the hands of unscrupulous Scalpel Bandits? The very notion seems absurd. And yet Marukido has learned not to dismiss such bizarre and apparently esoteric matters

too hastily.

As the sole surviving exponent of Project Equinox, the question assumes an intensely personal dimension. Might not she herself embody some dread wilderness spirit evoked by the program's enigmatic directors—Dr. Seikichi Sato and his colleague Dr. Akemi Adachi? Marukido has considered the possibility many times over the years. It does not frighten her.

On the contrary, she finds the idea strangely comforting.

Chapter Six

Quantum Psychosis

As she follows a narrow corridor, scarcely illuminated by a string of flickering light bulbs, Marukido detects a distinct—yet subtle—ether trace. The dry tang of ozone signals the presence of Deadly Orgone Radiation. A *significant* accumulation. DOR emissions have been identified as a reliable indicator that the astral membranes separating parallel dimensions have been breached. A serious rupture? Marukido cannot say for certain. However, she is sure about one thing.

A Code Mauve Threshold Violation has *definitely* occurred. Somewhere close. Very close. A door has been opened. Marukido is here to close it.

But first she must step *through* it.

Marukido crosses a bulkhead doorway. Left ajar, it appears almost inviting. Inside, the darkness is so profound it seems to suggest more than just the mere absence of light—as if the shadows themselves possess a genuinely quantifiable, elemental substance. An objective—*physical*—reality. Marukido's Psi-fidelity retinal implants compensate automatically. The digitally-enhanced infra-red function penetrates the gloom with the flawless precision of a brilliant laser beam.

Directly ahead, six naked human beings—three men and three women—are lying on a series of steel pallets that resemble standard autopsy slabs. Their heads have been shaved, like the pious initiates of an ascetic Buddhist sect: an impression reinforced by their generally emaciated state. Have they been observing a severe regimen of drastic abstinence and fasting in preparation for the imminent ritual? Are these victims? *Or volunteers?* Whatever the truth, the illusion of sacerdotal devotion is radically undermined by the sight of the profane contraptions attached to their faces.

Six identical devices—digital AI headsets, manufactured and marketed under the brand name *Zenotrope*—obscure their passive features. These mass-produced gadgets seem to have assumed the mystical significance of ceremonial death masks, solemnly blessed by the superstitious priesthood of a degenerate cargo cult: barbaric savages ignorant of their true purpose. At least that *might* have been the case, were it

not for the fact that both the headsets and their operating systems are still fully-functional, their wireless connections actively engaged.

Aeonic Interface—AI—derives from an innovative software program which, in conjunction with the Zenotrope, forms the integrated platform and delivery system for a phenomenally-popular form of mass-entertainment: the sensational *muzan-eiga* craze currently sweeping Zentropolis, its affiliated franchise-territories and client-satellites. Light years ahead of the Virtual Immersion systems it condemned to instant obsolescence, AI represents a quantum leap in digital simulation technology so convincingly *real* it seems to transcend reality. It has revolutionised the Psi-Core network—the interactive nexus of global communications—accessed by billions. Nobody *zones-in* unless they're using a Zenotrope loaded with AI software. The medium and the message have merged indivisibly, one indistinguishable from the other. Perfect symbiosis. The abbreviation *AI* suggests a curious resonance Marukido finds provocative. And maybe even disturbing.

In Japanese the word *ai* means love.

The Tanjobukai Corporation manufactures and markets the Zenotrope, AI software and all associated merchandise under the terms of an exclusive license granted by the system's creator and patent holder—an enigmatic genius who shuns publicity and whose identity remains a mystery. A closely-guarded secret. An extremely profitable subsidiary of the High Zaibatsu's complex economic cartel, Tanjobukai Corp specialises in the design and production of games and toys.

Considering this—and the men and women lying naked on their shining metal pallets, their eyes obscured behind the armorial visors of activated Zenotropes—Marukido wonders.

Are they playing a game?

Or are they perhaps experiencing a strange—and potentially sinister—new kind of *love*?

The subjects have succumbed to a deep trance-state or an artificially-induced coma. Electrodes adhere to their bodies, defining the exact locations of significant *chakra* points. They are connected via a series of wires and tubes—a web of synthetic umbilici—to a battery of machines monitoring their vital signs. A large control console dominates the centre of the floor, surrounded by the cold metal

pallets and their slumbering occupants. Wide monitor screens hang from the walls, arranged at precise intervals. Their smooth black surfaces exude the sombre opacity of volcanic obsidian, a panoramic gallery of magical scrying glasses adorning the inner-sanctum of a powerful alchemist.

Recessed lighting fixtures are suddenly activated. A subtle ultraviolet ambience illuminates the banks of digital equipment. The naked bodies glow like the consecrated remains of revered dignitaries reclining in stately repose upon the gleaming catafalques of a majestic funeral cortège. The ceremonial overtones suggest the numinous atmosphere of a monumental crypt, the symbolic reliquary of a forbidden religion. Marukido's infidel presence is a desecration that profanes this sacred place. But in this case *any* act of sacrilege is not simply justified. It is vital.

Necessary.

A door at the opposite end of the room opens and five men enter.

Marukido seeks cover in a shallow alcove, merging perfectly with the darkness.

Unaware of her presence, the men are members of a *rajikura-shukyo* sect called the Dzyadic Hierarchy of the Archon Ascendant—otherwise known as Dzyadians. They wear outfits that resemble a curious mixture of ceremonial vestments and the protective apparel customarily employed by scientists and technicians working with dangerous atomic isotopes, volatile chemicals or hazardous biological material. But the elements the Dzyadians intend to harness now are potentially more deadly than all three combined. And they know it. So does Marukido.

The control console powers up, its brilliant chrome mouldings and coloured LED displays garishly illuminated like a vintage 1950s jukebox. Blizzards of static convulse the screens, implying a serious malfunction. But Marukido knows better than that. Her heightened perceptions are sensitive to the severe Typhonian currents disrupting the ambient Dharmawave Spectrum.

Engaging the fractal lens function of her Psi-fidelity retinal implants, Marukido detects a coherent series of fifth-dimensional thoughtform patterns obscured behind the inchoate snowstorms occluding the monitor screens. The signals incorporate the Choronzonian codes of a high ceremonial summoning ritual. Expressed as an algorithm, the complex equations of higher mathematics invoke astral entities that exist beyond space. Outside time. Older and colder than Death itself. A sub-atomic

particle stream—the anti-life vibration—provides the medium of manifestation, the sacred contamination vector. The Opener of the Way. The key to *Becoming*.

Marukido gazes directly into the heart of the fluctuating vortex. The Psi-fidelity fractal lenses can record a thousand-terabytes-a-second of digitally-encrypted, aether-sensitive information—to be safely downloaded and decoded later—whilst simultaneously maintaining the psychic firewalls that insulate her consciousness from the potentially fatal consequences of full neurological exposure. It's more than just a question of physical survival.

At this moment her very *soul* is at stake.

The air curdles, a putrid soup succumbing to the intolerable stresses of spatial distortion. An obscene presence—inconceivably vast, unutterably dark—is forcing its way in from *outside*.

Something is *coming*.

The test subjects lie paralysed on their cold steel slabs like stoic cadavers patiently anticipating an imminent autopsy. The Zenotropes remain securely fastened to their shaven skulls like sinister parasites feeding on the electrical impulses of heightened REM-state brainwave activity. And now Marukido understands what is happening behind the AI headsets' opaque black visors—the occult phenomenon that holds the sleepers transfixed like traumatised children in thrall to a fascinating nightmare. The subjects are experiencing—on a fundamental, neurological level—direct Aeonian Interface with the incorporeal emanations the Dzyadians are channelling. They are being assimilated—mentally, physically and spiritually—by the dread eminences of the Qlithonian Zone.

Possessed.

Once dismissed by so-called 'experts' as a paranoid fantasy, the phenomenon of possession has a proven *scientific* basis established by Dr. Akira Yoshida, whose controversial research has made his name reviled in some quarters—*revered* in others. He even coined a term to describe it.

Quantum Psychosis.