



solstice

# Chapter 1

Tuesday, December 5

1:31 a.m. PDT

*Please forgive me for what I am about to do.*

The unborn phantom in her empty womb clawed its way out, ripping its mother to bleeding, gasping shreds.

Io convulsed. The searing, familiar pain scraped her swollen throat. Vicious bile surged from her foodless stomach and past her dried, bleeding lips. Foulness splattered onto the brick and concrete glazed by December's chill, stirring with the alley's resident stench of frosted garbage and waste. Labored breathing froze contrails in the air, seizing, wrenching, heaving her scarred body. Brown, trembling eyes followed the beads of perspiration tumbling off her slick skin and dripping into the pond of watery vomit at her feet.

Surge three of five thrashed out. She retched; it sounded like a strangled scream.

Her sickness. It was the only name she had for her bouts of uncontrollable nausea that gouged her with such unpredictable regularity. Forever childless, Io thought it felt like giving birth—birth to a vicious, frenzied baby that would devour its mother before devouring the world in its furious, screaming onslaught. Like a four-

year-long morning sickness, her sickness came without warning, and it brought with it a vulnerability she was not accustomed to. Knowing what it was and why it started four years prior no longer mattered to her.

She just wanted the helplessness to end.

Intimate with her sickness for four years, she knew its routine. The phantom child demanded five full expulsions. Always five. The fourth and fifth were always the worst. By then, every abdominal muscle began to pull and tear at each other, twisting her ulcerous stomach into Gordian knots.

Number four came. Io retched and vomited again. Her uneven fingernails, dirtied with straggling particles of clay and shale from previous nights, clawed into the brick wall in front of her as she tried to steady her wavering body.

She heard two sets of feet shuffling into the alley. They paused, then moved toward her. Her instincts, sharpened and immune to the madness consuming the rest of her body, made out and tracked their indistinct mutterings. One man giggled. Another giggled back and then mimicked her retching. Their words receded into garbled nothings. They drew next to her. One of them brushed against her, prolonging the motion, passing an open palm across her rear.

“You okay, miss?” one of them faked concern.

Io saw two pairs of feet in expensive winter boots stand on either side of her, keeping a safe distance from the mess she was making. Past the stink of her own vomit, she could smell the cheap pitcher beer in their breaths as it hung frozen in the arctic night.

“That is so...fu...fucking gross,” the other one slurred out. “Shit, wh...what’d you drink?”

“You need a doctor or something?” the first one asked. “We can take you to a hospital if you want. Want that, miss?”

Their Samaritan banter and drunken giggles continued. Io ignored them as she braced herself. The final surge strangled and wrenched its way through her body, slashing its fiery path through what was left of her ulcerous stomach and esophagus.

Words and meaning became muffled and blurred.

“Want us to take you to a doctor or something? We’re parked really close. We’ll take you. C’mom.”

“We should take her.”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“Where’s the car?”

“Over there. Remember?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She felt the man on her left trying to cradle her into his arms.

She pushed away and slammed both palms into the brick wall.

She grunted hard. The last of the night's sickness burst out. Bile's acrid taste misted and scorched through her sinuses. Her body seized as the cramps in her stomach subsided too slowly, too reluctantly. Emotionless tears moistened her eyes. She swiped at them. She dragged back cold, stiffened strands of short black hair from her face.

The expensive winter boots were still standing on either side of her, their masters' legs jittery with drunkenness. And anticipation. She gingerly lifted herself and looked at the two men. Two college kids at least ten years her junior, one of them towering a full foot taller than her. One wore a sagging blue sweatshirt over an untidy flannel shirt, the other a cream-colored sports jacket with sown letters she didn't care to decipher. Both were red-faced and hopelessly drunk.

Both grinned at her.

"You partied too hard," the blue sweatshirt said. "What the hell did you drink?"

"We'll take you to the hospital, okay?" the sports jacket added. "There's one close by...down the street. We'll take you, okay?"

Io remained silent as they chuckled to themselves and struggled to retain what precious little balance they had left. The one on her left outstretched his arms and stumbled two steps toward her.

"Let...let me give you a hand," he slurred out, offering her once more the promised sanctuary of his drunken embrace.

Io's moist, almond eyes narrowed. She held up her hand and froze his advance.

"I'm fine," she spoke. "Thank you. Good night."

She turned to leave the alley. The sports jacket sidestepped and blocked her path. It did not surprise her.

"You don't just want to go back out there, miss," he grinned and fussed with his hands. "Really, you need a hospital. We can take you. You want a hospital."

"I'm fine," she repeated. "Good night."

The sweatshirt behind her seized her shoulders. He chuckled as he teetered back and forth, swaying her body along with his as he held on.

It did not surprise her.

"No, really," he giggled. "You need a hospital. It's for your own good, miss."

"For your own good," the sports jacket in front of her repeated as he took a step toward her. Like an overzealous teenager, he cupped his trembling hands over her breasts. He bent down to her 5'5" frame and looked at the fixed, expressionless shape of her lips. "You don't mind if I kiss those pretty lips, do you?"

Words and meaning became muffled and blurred.

"She stinks like puke, man!"

“Shut up.”

“Don’t kiss her! Oh, fuck! Fuck! You’re fucking sick!”

“Just hold her and shut up!”

Her lips twisted into a small, sated grin.

*You once told me, “Everyone is capable of killing another person.” You said that every person has that capacity, that darkness, in them. You said that for some, it is buried deep beneath layers of self-control and inhibition nurtured by any number of religious and social conditionings. For most, only the most traumatic circumstances will bring that darkness to light, circumstances that seldom touch those leading normal, everyday lives.*

**H**er other sickness. She had no other name for it. This one she’d been intimate with most of her adult life, but its nature and processes remained a mystery to her.

She never really thought on how she did what she did. Never stopped to think on how she’d managed to do the things she did. Like pulling away from a larger man’s grasp. Like knocking down another in front of her. Like moving with speed and strength beyond the apparent limits of her small, scarred body. Like turning a deaf ear to the screams that turned from surprise to terror to pleading. She only knew that she had, usually only after noticing her blood-stained *wakizashi* sword in her hand.

Like a rapid-fire sequence of grainy images playing on a flea market projector, she’d see her *wakizashi* slicing away with deadly grace as her entire body glided and danced along with the rhythmic strikes. All she’d remember were flashes. Pictures without context. Frozen images removed from any meaning or sense.

Blue eyes sobering instantly in wild recognition.

A trembling palm divided by a razor-straight line.

A neckline melting away in red.

She couldn’t understand why she never remembered hearing any of them scream.

*And then there are those who know what they are capable of because they’ve ventured past that border separating humanity from depravity. Those who embrace that darkness as a part of them.*

Io looked at her watch. It read 2:04 a.m. She looked toward the neighboring street. Nothing had changed in the outside world since the onset of nausea had forced her into the alley. She remembered having seen two bars nearby, the closest about half a block down that same street. She'd lost track of the time she spent wandering, baiting, biding her time, waiting for *it* to happen. *It* almost always did.

Cold, indifferent eyes looked down at *it* and its aftermath on the ground. Blood pooled between the two men, then oozed toward the splattered remnants of her earlier sickness. Pained expressions were frozen on their dead, paling faces. Io studied them. Traces of a former morality surfaced, asking whether they deserved this death, whether a few more years of college and maturity could have rehabilitated them into decent human beings. Cold rationalization suppressed morality. Rationalization had chilled her senses sometime after her tenth victim. By her twentieth, it had numbed them. And everything else. The stinging anger of having her breasts grabbed; the revulsion at being kissed by forced, drunken lips; the nausea she'd felt when her blade impaled its first ever victim forgotten years ago.

She knelt down and cleaned the blood from her *wakizashi* on the cream-colored sports jacket. She sheathed it in its scabbard and readjusted her coat to conceal the blade and the Obregon pistols holstered beneath each arm. She glided out of the alley and onto the sidewalk. The grimy neon glow of a buzzing liquor store sign alone witnessed her disappearance even as a raucous outburst of drunken cheers carried from the nearest bar.

*And there are those who have come to see a greater darkness still. The darkness of uncertainty, of not knowing how far they will fall, how much they will sacrifice of their humanity in the process, and how much others will sacrifice with them. That was your darkness. Your sickness, as you called it.*

*You never saw the beginning as you remember it. No one did. But even those who could have seen it would have had no manner of describing it. Reality is, in many ways, shaped by our perception of what we can and can't describe. But who could have described the beginning? This is all we know.*

*Two people chased down a murderer to an empty corporate plaza. A laptop, his only means of defense, fell and clattered to the ground as its screen shattered with the impact. He tried to summon its power, but one of his pursuers fired a shot at it, impacting its screen. Shards of it flew into his eyes. He was blinded, they say, and so never saw what happened next. But he was scared out of his wits because he knew he was being chased.*

*His two pursuers couldn't know they weren't the ones he was running in terror from.*

*Out of the darkness of the surrounding buildings, it emerged. It rushed toward one of the two pursuers. She and her partner fired at it. It absorbed their rounds. It did not stop. It accelerated and pounced on her first, stabbing her through the chest, then slitting her throat. With inhuman speed, it then moved toward her partner. He emptied his pistol. Half of his gun's barrel went rolling across the plaza's brick tiles. So did his severed head. The killer then moved to the fallen, blinded man. The killer finished him. It left a message.*

*That message started everything.*

*That message was just the beginning.*

# Chapter 2

Thursday, December 7

8:13 a.m. CDT

A pigtailed Latina child sheltered behind protective glass smiled at her guardian angel.

Io tried to smile back.

A taxi driver, the third in the past 20 minutes, asked Io if she wanted a ride. Ten dollars less than the previous two. No meter. From O'Hare to downtown Chicago, it was a deal, he said. She said no. She ignored the hard sell. Her eyes guarded the small girl bundled in heavy pink waiting with her young mother in the airport's ground transportation center.

The mother, a short woman with long curls of brown hair over a round, bronze face, wore a thin, red coat that invited December's chill through its slits and into her shivering body. She talked in Spanish on her cell phone. Io had caught pieces of her conversation on her way to hail a cab. Someone had forgotten to pick them up.

Standing beside the taxi pickup lanes 60 feet away, Io didn't want to leave the girl and her mother. Driven by untapped maternal instincts, by faded childhood memories, or by envy, she chose to stay. She watched over them through long, hidden gazes. The mother made sure her daughter was tightly bundled. She'd done so 12 times since the start of the phone call. The girl nodded with the smiling assurance of a seven-year-old. She stood against the glass panes, tapping her

fire-truck red boots out of rhythm to the howls and hisses of cars and shuttles bustling past the transportation center.

The girl looked at Io again. She smiled.

Io looked away. When she looked back, the mother was off her cell phone. She knelt down in front of her daughter. Moving lips asked a silent question. The girl nodded. Motherly hands adjusted the pink winter hat on her tiny head. Small mittened hands immediately moved the hat back. The girl laughed when her mother tried again.

Minutes later, the mother picked up her cell phone again. Her reddened, shivering face brightened. She nodded before hanging up. She told her daughter to follow her. The child took her by the hand. They trotted away.

The girl looked back at Io and smiled again. The smile vanished behind the closing blue doors of an elevator taking them both away from Io's protective gaze.

Frigid air bit into Io's glove-less, numbed hands. She slid them into her trench coat pockets, noticing for the first time that her body was shivering. The blue elevator doors remained closed as she turned away.

A Turkish taxi driver pulled up next to her. In excited, broken English, he asked if she wanted a ride.

For \$30 more than the previous driver, he'd take her to the Loop.

**Intimate**, measured steps carried Io through Chicago's waking downtown, re-acquainting her with the city she'd called home for two years. Memories, like the blackened snow and the salt-chalked cars and sidewalks, were smeared throughout. Ethnic restaurants, seas of parking lots announcing early bird specials, a corner drugstore now owned by its fifth pharmaceutical franchise, all were pregnant with vestiges of stillborn normalcy. Streets and memories wrapped themselves around her body like a distant, drunken uncle. Those memories had driven her back to her native San Francisco.

Io glided through the swarms of corporate employees buzzing to hives and honeycomb salaries. Dressed casually in a buttoned white blouse, pleated blue skirt, and a short, black trench coat better suited for Bay Area style than Midwest winter, she blended into the suits, ties, and business heels surrounding her. Her short-cropped black hair was layered into a neat bob, and parted bangs gave her a semblance of inconspicuous normalcy. She was a mid-level manager on her way to the office. One of dozens on the same street. She could be seen. And quickly forgotten.

Half a block down, beyond downtown's growing bustle, she spotted her final destination: a small coffeehouse draped behind a

tattered, jade awning whose white, cursive letters spelled *WINTER NIGHT*. Construction scaffolding from nearby renovations obstructed its inconspicuous storefront buried behind the drab olive greens and browns of the local corporate architecture. Across the street from it was a Cosmos Coffeehouse, bright and neatly presented in its franchised packaging. Inside, an assembly line of patrons nursed cardboard cups stamped in copyrighted promotional slogans. The contrast always amused her. No local business report or patron ever seemed to wonder just how the little independent coffeehouse could stay afloat with the franchised goliath right across its street.

Tape-recorded Islamic songs and prayers rose from the corner newsstand. Io slowed her pace as she walked past it, and was surprised to see it still operated by the same elderly Arabic man she'd seen during her last visit to the city. They made eye contact. The man didn't remember her. She figured he wouldn't. The last time she'd seen him, he'd been a scapegoat. One of hundreds across an embittered nation after the rout from Tehran. He'd been lying on the ground, his head bleeding, his tape recorder smashed, his magazines and newspapers strewn about in cathartic rage. She was there too, dealing with his three assailants as complicit locals only watched. Anika had not been pleased. Certainly not when the police showed up after someone had called to report that a dark-skinned Chinese woman was beating the shit out of three white men.

Io almost smiled at him. She stopped when her eyes saw a *Chronicle* magazine on display next to the new stack of *Chicago Tribunes*. On the cover was a computer screen filled with text that read like a bad suspense novel: a wife, without apparent motive, pulled out a gun, killed her unsuspecting husband as he watched television, and then turned the gun on herself. The bolded yellow headline read, *SCRIBES: URBAN LEGEND OR REALITY?*

Io picked up a copy and flipped to the main article. She read one callout, a quote from a police detective: "*Crimes without motives have been around forever. It's pure fantasy that there are people that can write things, even crimes, and make them come true.*" A photograph showed a crime scene, the caption describing how a child of 11 shot his entire family dead before killing himself. One subsection was titled *DON POINSETTIA: THE MURDER OF THE CENTURY AND ITS UNANSWERED QUESTIONS*.

A round, pompous face Io remembered too well grinned at her.

"Are you buying?" the old man asked her in accented English.

She looked up. "No. They never write about anything interesting."

Putting the magazine back in its place, Io nodded a silent farewell to the man and crossed the street, walking the last few yards before turning into the Winter Night coffeehouse.

Minutes later, as two people ahead of her in line finished ordering their drinks, Io walked up to the counter and smiled. In a bright, crystallized voice, she asked for her usual caramel ice coffee. Without whipped cream. When she picked up her drink and saw that the new kids working the counter had sprayed a small puffy mountain on her drink, she sighed in silent amusement.

If only Anika recruited coffeehouse employees as well as she recruited Editors.

**T**wenty minutes later, Io sat in her usual corner of Winter Night's spacious, dimly lit basement level, sipping from her drink as she browsed through December 6th's newspaper. It was her favorite spot, her vantage point from which she could keep everything in view. The badly plastered walls painted in rustic orange and brown tones; the rickety stairway leading up to the main floor; the few, scattered customers, most of them college kids who thought supporting the independent coffeehouse was an act of socio-economic subversion against Cosmos, Java Mug, and the WTO; the glass partition separating the coffeehouse from a small, outside corridor with three unmarked doors.

Silent moments passed before an employee struggling with a full bag of garbage came down the stairs. He slipped into the corridor and exited through the rightmost door. Seconds later, he came out and went into the leftmost door, emerging with a box of restaurant napkins. The center door remained untouched.

She took another sip from her drink. Casual glances kept track of everyone and everything. Including the three unmarked doors.

The center door cracked open. Finally. Barely. The young adults immersed in the cozy embrace of Winter Night's rustic ambiance and the didactic comfort of college textbooks didn't notice it. They never did.

Io got up and tossed the rest of her drink into the garbage bin next to the stairs. She adjusted her short trench coat and pushed past the glass door leading into the corridor. She glanced into the reflection; books and conversations remained more interesting to the patrons than her silent departure. She slid through the open center door and sealed it behind her.

An old familiar mustiness greeted her nostrils as she entered an archive room, a long hall partitioned into two perfect rows of vintage metal shelves holding stacks of archived material and about as much dust. Manuscripts of who-knew-what filed out of sequence and order, bloated manila folders stuffed with newspaper clippings stained yellow from years of neglect, newspapers piled together in no apparent

order, one of them detailing the crash of 1929. The filing system in place seemed as current as the newspaper reporting on the Great Depression.

At the end of the room, Io came to another door with a framed black and white photograph of a voting station in Baghdad hung beside it. From her coat pocket, she took out a card marked *READMAN PUBLIC LIBRARY* and held it up against the picture frame. A few seconds later, a familiar click behind the door unlocked it. She put her card away and opened the door. Past it was a small room scraped with dilapidated white plaster. A narrow, spiraling flight of black, metallic stairs took her down two more levels and to another door. It was already cracked open for her.

Going through the door, and leaving behind the illusory stillness of the archive room, always jarred her senses.

Electronic voices hummed a warm, monotone welcome. A din of indistinct human voices forming a tapestry of meaningless syllables greeted her.

The subterranean heart of the Editors' main base of operations, the main surveillance and dispatch center known as the Cutting Room, stirred with life as a small army of personnel operated within its wired expanses. Manned computers scattered throughout dozens of perfectly divided stations worked endlessly. Flat-screen monitors were dotted with lines of information compiled from countless databases and surveillance programs, all working in unison to track the movements of 240 separate individuals. Technical Writers, tasked with deciphering the constant influx of data Researchers fed them, spoke in different languages as they relayed processed information back to their field counterparts. Fixed at the center of the Cutting Room was a giant digital map of the United States, its simulated landscape perforated with moving red and green dots and tracer lines. Several workers sat before it like bored movie patrons, speaking into wireless headsets, clacking endless strands of information onto black, ergonomic keyboards.

Several workers noticed Io walking in. No one spoke to her. No one greeted her. No one needed to. Everyone had heard: Io had been summoned.

Winter Night's residents hated her. Always wondering if anyone would so much as nod at her, Io was never surprised when no one did. Most of her colleagues played dumb, outright pretending not to notice her passing by despite her slow, deliberate steps daring them to say something, even a hissed insult. An Indian woman looked up at her, and then nervously looked back down at her computer screen. Another man, a Nigerian national, barely held in a sneer. Fear and hatred watched her slip through the darkened Cutting Room. Silent

colleagues cast long, disgusted glances at her, tracking each of her catlike steps across the carpeted floors.

The cacophonous, multilingual bustle of the Cutting Room ended at a white corridor leading to a dead end and an unmarked, metal door. As she approached it, she lifted her hand; her palms were sweating. She smirked to herself. Even after everything, Anika still had a way of making her nervous.

Her clammy hand pushed open the door. A whiff of ossified, stale air exhaled and drifted into her nostrils. Her eyes readjusted to the dimmed lights of Anika's library. Rows of stuffed bookshelves stretched farther than she cared to estimate. One Editor claimed the library was at least twice the size of the expansive Cutting Room. No one knew for certain; few were ever invited in. Fewer still were allowed to remain there for more than a few minutes. But everyone knew what the library held: a confiscated collection of Scribe writings gathered throughout the decades, a Library of Congress housing the written crimes of entire generations. Books of every type, finish, binding, and color formed an endless paper mosaic across the dimmed, winding corridors of metal shelving.

Somewhere, walking among the unmarked shelves of books, keeping herself hidden from the Editors she commanded, was Anika Paige.

Io peered through the scant slivers of space crushed between the medley of stacked books. The sea of Scribe writings was calm, unbroken by any strand of visible movement; Anika was nowhere.

Perusing through the aisles closest to her, Io ran her fingers through the spiral binding on a stack of college-ruled notebooks. She pulled one at random. A young, immature hand had scrawled *KEEP OUT* on its bright red card stock cover. Yellowed pages revealed intimate diary entries; random scribbles of hearts and abstract nothings engraved the margins. She flipped the pages. Bright red lettering scratching over itself in maddened pen strokes caught her attention.

*TOM WAS AN ALCOHOLIC. HE DRANK EVERY NIGHT. AND SOME NIGHTS, HE'D BEAT MY MOTHER. BUT ON HIS NEXT NIGHT OUT, HE DRANK TOO MUCH, AND WAS STUPID ENOUGH TO DRIVE. HE WAS PULLED OVER. WHEN THE POLICE OFFICER TRIED TO ARREST HIM FOR DRUNK DRIVING, HE PUT UP A FIGHT. TOM WAS SENT TO PRISON FOR IT. MY MOTHER SOON FORGOT HIM. HE'D NEVER HIT HER AGAIN.*

"What do you think?"

The voice shouldn't have startled Io. It did. She flapped the notebook shut and looked around. Anika's deep voice lingered among the creased pages all around her.

“Run of the mill Scribe soap opera,” Io smirked. “I’m surprised it worked. She crossed out half of what she wrote.”

“Not everyone grew up with computers,” Anika’s voice floated around her. “Some of the worst Scribes did their writing on paper.”

Io shrugged. “So what happened to this one?”

A pause. “What usually happens when a young person discovers they’re a Scribe. That they have the power to write anything into reality. She killed two people during her senior year in college. We took her out.”

“Hm.”

She heard Anika’s calm, slow steps begin to pace around the library. When Io peered through the shelving, she saw a fragment of a tall, black figure gliding out of view behind a block of books several rows down.

“So,” Io began, “as much as I enjoy your little theatrics and the occasional light reading in here, I’m assuming you called me here for other reasons.”

She heard Anika chuckle to herself.

“Your colleagues would welcome the chance to be in here.”

“Most of them haven’t already been in here several times. And...I’ve already seen what you look like.”

Io had heard the rumors. Rumor was all most Editors had to go by in lieu of actually seeing their reclusive editor in chief. The most widespread rumor—that Anika was horrifically disfigured, with half her face burned off after an Edit that had gone terribly wrong—was also the least true. She’d seen Anika twice. Both times, standing face to face with a black, Amazonian woman towering over 6’4”, she’d felt miniscule. No one knew Anika’s exact age. Io guessed she was in her 50s based on the noticeable strands of gray streaking her braided mahogany hair, and the steadied, immaculate composure that gave her dignified, complete control over every situation, and every person. Anika could be a loved and loving grandmother, or a feared and respected field general. Steady, wise, vigilant, and demanding. No one that saw her would ever mistake her for a little old librarian. But then, so few ever saw her to think it at all.

“So why *am* I here?” Io asked when Anika remained silent.

“Sit down,” her boss commanded.

Anika’s presence was a disembodied voice buried behind the stacked shelves of books, and a laptop computer set up at the center of the giant hall. Io walked down the aisle and toward the glowing laptop, casting curious glances to her sides, trying to catch another glimpse of the library’s resident.

“I assume you haven’t heard?” Anika asked as Io sat down in front of the computer.

“Another Scribe was murdered?” she guessed. On the laptop screen, she saw several windows minimized at the bottom of the toolbar. As always, they were arranged in a specific sequence from left to right. She clicked the leftmost window.

“A bit more than that this time.”

Two profiles displayed onscreen. Profiles for two of Anika’s Editors.

“Two of our German nationals,” Io remarked, recognizing their faces. “Anelie and Kai.”

She clicked the next minimized window. She gasped.

Bloodied photographs of Anelie Junker and Kai Baumann displayed. Dead photographs. Anelie lay sprawled out on the earth-colored tiles of a nameless corporate plaza, her neck gashed open, her chest punctured as if by a machine. The two separated pictures of Kai—one of his body and one of his severed head resting several feet away—told a similarly gruesome story.

“Dear gods,” Io muttered out. “What happened?”

“Police found them dead yesterday morning in a Detroit suburb,” Anika’s calm voice explained as her slow footsteps paced and reverberated across the room. “They died around 2 a.m. Next to them was the body of their target, a Michigan Scribe named William Reuters. Initial reports say a bladed weapon was used.”

“No doubt about that,” Io remarked, pointing to Kai’s severed head and then to the deep gash across Anelie’s throat. “Those are clean cuts. Couldn’t have been a knife. It was something big, but precise. Not an axe. Like a large sword maybe. But who the hell carries something like that around?”

“It could not have been a sword. Kai’s gun was cut in half. And whoever it was moved quickly enough to dodge their fire. Spent casings from their guns were found all around them.”

“That’s not possible. To do this, he had to get in close. How could both of them miss with him being right on top of them like that?”

Io narrowed her eyes as she pulled up the third set of pictures, those of the Scribe Reuters. Red crust sprawled over lacerated, closed eyelids. Frozen, blood-streaked hands clawed at the tiles beneath them. He hadn’t tried to defend himself against his killer; terror had gripped him completely. Terror hid behind the bloodied eyelids wincing in frozen pain.

“A Ghostwriter?” she asked.

“Kai connected a murder in a nearby suburb to him,” Anika’s voice affirmed. “Anelie called me on it that same night.”

“And his laptop was busted up,” Io said, touching the photograph of the laptop and tracing its shattered screen. “So it’s possible he didn’t kill them?”

“Autopsy said he died right after they did. By the same blade no less. It’s unlikely he could have conjured whatever killed them.”

“Maybe he’d conjured it beforehand and lost control of it?”

Anika’s footsteps stopped. “No. Mila and Theo already salvaged his hard drive and checked his place. Besides the evidence for the other murder, they didn’t find anything. But even that murder was so generically written, it’s hard to believe he could have written whatever killed Kai and Anelie.”

“Mila, huh? Who else is in Michigan?”

“Tausif and Josephine.”

Io knew Tausif well. A Bangladeshi national, and one of the few Editors who was friendly with her. A warm, caring man, he’d saved her from a Scribe’s influence years ago. She would have liked him even if he hadn’t. Mila, on the other hand, outright despised her.

“Are they following up?” she asked Anika.

“Theo is making an initial run into the local police computer. I haven’t ordered Tausif on the case yet.”

“Why not?”

A pause. A soft, amused chuckle drifted throughout the shelves of collected pages, like that of a teacher assuring her eager student there *was* a method to her madness.

“*Ah, ya decia,*” Io muttered to herself. “So for now, this gets written up as a triple homicide. Easy enough for it to go unnoticed, you think?”

Anika’s slow steps resumed. “It’s improbable. The whole thing almost looks ritualistic. The police will look into this one carefully.”

“Trouble for us?”

“Only if they’re fools enough to release anything to the media. I doubt they’d want the public to know the particulars.”

Io nodded. The particulars were more like oddities. Anelie and Kai, as far as society and its records were concerned, did not exist. Anyone trying to uncover their identities would find nothing but false IDs, equally fake names and addresses, fingerprints and physical markings with no records, and eventually dead ends.

“Are you sure we should be so blasé about them snooping in on this?”

“At this point,” Anika’s voice said, “something else concerns me more. Pull up the next one.”

Io clicked the next minimized window. She looked quizzically at the jpeg image that came up. It was another shot of Reuters, focusing on the gaping wound on his chest. But there was something else. The man’s blood had coagulated and crusted around a symbol engraved into his flesh. The engraving, no bigger than the size of a palm, was flawless, with scalpel-like precision too clean to have been made by

the same blade that sliced off Kai's head. It was a single Kanji character, engraved with calligraphic perfection.

"*Mother?*" she muttered out.

"*Mother?*" Anika repeated. "That's it?"

"*Oka,*" Io nodded.

Anika's invisible steps became quicker, more urgent than before. When she spoke again, her voice's inflection matched their pace.

"We have 43 Scribes killed in the past four months, now this."

Io crossed her arms. "You think it's the same Scribe Killer?"

"There's no reason to suspect it's anyone else. He was after Reuters. And most of the other Scribes murdered so far have been killed in similar fashion."

"But none of the others had markings on them," her Editor suggested. "And this is the first time our people were targeted."

"We don't know that they were," Anika reminded her. "They could have just been at the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Or someone knows about us, and knew who Anelie and Kai were. I saw a *Chronicle* magazine talking about Scribes again. Didn't get a chance to read the article, though."

"It rehashes previous writings. The usual anecdotes, the usual vague conclusions. For all purposes, it casts Scribes as urban legend. Only this time they focused on Poinsettia."

"I saw," Io sneered. "Even in death, the prick still gets publicity."

Anika's voice drifted into a chuckle again. "You and Xiu Mei did a good job of eliminating him, but the Edit was too high-profile. His death was bound to raise questions."

"Do you think people are starting to suspect?"

"I can't be sure. But we have to consider that someone *does* know about the Editors. Which is why I've called you here."

"Hm," Io sat back in her chair. "Should be fun. The Ghostwriters in California are getting a little boring."

Anika's footsteps stopped. Again, long, silent seconds passed before her voice reappeared. It held a new inflection. Almost accusatory.

"Where were you that night?"

"You really want to know?" Io replied in stride.

"I found something in yesterday's news. Two college kids were found dead in an alley out west. I can only assume they were up to no good." Anika's voice tightened. "You really do enjoy the immunity of working for me, don't you?"

Io grinned. The day she joined the Editors was the day she ceased to exist. Every trace of her—her birth record, Social Security number, student loans, her 3.87 GPA for her two years at Berkeley—had been erased entirely, rendering her anonymous to the rest of

society. She existed as Io only to Anika and the rest of the Editors. Everyone who joined the Editors went through the same. Having so much as a living distant relative was grounds for a candidate to be purged from the recruitment list.

“You knew what you were getting when you hired me,” Io shrugged. “You knew what I did. If anything, you knew this job would make it easier for me to hunt.”

“Hunt?” Anika’s voice retorted. “Is that what you’re calling it now?”

“Hunting, punishing, pick your euphemism.”

“I assumed that at some point you’d tire of it. You’re going to be caught some day.”

“I’d feel sorry for the idiot that tried to arrest me,” Io smirked, throwing a casual gaze into the expanse of creased pages concealing her boss. Not to defy Anika. Not to challenge her. Simply to assure her of her convictions and the singular logic that upheld them: that, in the end, only cruelty could destroy cruelty. “It’s not becoming an issue now, is it?”

“I respect your motivations for doing what you do,” Anika’s stern voice replied. “About as much as I can without condoning it. However, remember that despite your skills, I only tolerate you because of your one practical use to me.”

“And that is?”

New sharpness edged Anika’s words. “You’re fast and efficient. On account of all the moral sidestepping you allow yourself. Small wonder your colleagues dislike you.”

“They’re just jealous.”

“They know the world isn’t split between right and wrong.”

“So why keep me around?”

“Like I said. You’re fast. And efficient. You keep things simple. On an assignment like this, simplicity may be in order.”

Io smirked. “I thought Xiu Mei was your golden girl.”

“She has moral restraint. You don’t.”

Io held her tongue. That was only one thing they could say about the Chinese national who’d partnered with her for the Poinsettia assignment. Upright, rigid, blindly obedient to her motherland’s militaristic policies, and unfriendly were among the more flattering things Io could think to say about her.

“No one’s been able to get any kind of lead on the Scribe Killer,” Anika continued. “England’s Scribes are gone, and the ones here are dropping like flies. We’ve been a step behind the whole time, but now we require an immediate response.” She paused. “Pull up the last window.”

Io clicked the window as instructed. An electronic authorization

from Anika to the base's onsite armory lit the screen up in bright, ruby red. Only Editors on high-risk assignments ever needed it. Io had already received it dozens of times. The two-sentence authorization granted Io permission to withdraw her weapons of choice and whatever ammunition she requested. Anika's electronic signature verified the order.

"Whoever killed Kai and Anelie was ruthless," Anika's voice concluded. "I want my most ruthless hunting him down."

# Chapter 3

Thursday, December 7

4:45 p.m. CDT

When her cell phone rang for the third time, Nakamura Yuniko's brown eyes dragged open. Her head twitched back when she saw a decapitated corpse reanimating itself on her TV screen. A fourth ring jerked her body from her bare futon mattress. Her cell phone's small screen blinked green, registering an incoming call. With her missed call indicator blinking incessant red, her phone looked appropriately festive for the holiday season. Yuniko fumbled for it as a girl on the television screen ran off into the night.

"*Moshi moshi*," she mumbled into the receiver.

Io, on the other line, couldn't help but chuckle to herself as she paced her small hotel room.

"Please don't tell me you were still sleeping," she said in perfect Japanese. "I've been calling you for the past ten minutes."

"Io?"

"Yep. Do you have any idea what time it is?"

The Researcher looked at her alarm clock tossed on the scuffed floor next to her TV stand. It marked 2:47 p.m. Outside her window, San Francisco's uninviting, dreary December sky made her want to go back to sleep. Groaning to herself, she searched her futon for the remote.

"I was...up late," Yuniko muttered.

"All-nighter?"

"Yeah."

"Still trying to crack Lexicon-Mobius?"

“Took...a break. Went after some guy...a phisher. He was...he had a good scam...got a few people...but I finished him this morning.”

“Hm. What the hell are you watching anyway?” Io asked when she thought she heard a demonic giggle.

“Your movie. *Tomie*,” her partner replied with a yawn. “The...the first one.”

“Watching a bad horror movie while you sleep in the middle of the afternoon? Have you even gone out?”

“It’s raining.”

“Whatever,” Io rolled her eyes. She stood next to her own window. Heavy rain was drenching Chicago.

“So what’s...going on?” Yuniko asked after turning off her TV and flopping back down on her futon. “Why were...what did...boss lady want?”

“Well, for starters, you need to get dressed, pack your gear, and meet me in Detroit tomorrow.”

Yuniko’s eyes burst open. She jerked back up and fumbled for her thick black-framed glasses.

“*What?*”

“We’re on assignment,” Io explained. “Pack up your gear and try to be in Detroit by tomorrow afternoon. The plane will be ready. Same place.” She paused. “And please bring clean clothes this time, you slob.”

“Detroit?” Yuniko looked at her stained black t-shirt, equally stained gray sweatpants, and dirty white socks and felt self-conscious. Her sputtering speech picked up speed. “But that’s...we’re...not even Midwest! Detroit...that’s...that’s Mila’s neighborhood...right?”

“Yeah, but boss lady wants *us* there.”

“What? Why? Why now when... That doesn’t...that doesn’t make sense! Pulling us out of San Francisco like that!”

Io pulled the phone away from her ear. Yuniko’s voice was pitching upwards as it was prone to do when she was agitated. Unfortunately for Io’s sense of hearing, Yuniko was agitated easily. And often.

“I’ll fill you in on the details when you get there,” she explained. “I’ll meet you at Detroit Metro, okay? Call me when you’re inbound.”

“Wait a second! Wait! What...what is this all about? Io?!”

“You know we can’t talk.”

“But you can’t...you just can’t expect me to drop everything! Fly half way across the country...on no notice! And it’s...that’s not even our region!” Yuniko jumped from her futon and sidestepped the carpet of discarded printouts, ripped candy wrappers, and littered soda cans on her way to her jungle-like computer workstation. Empty microwave dinner dishes, discarded candy wrappers, and several

more soda cans cluttered her workspace. She shook each can, found a cola can that wasn't empty, and gulped down its flattened content. She made a face, then searched through the remaining cans for more. "Not now, anyway! Bell...Bell was...he was acting up last night. You know that girl? His girlfriend? The one...the one who left him last month? Her car's brakes went dead for a moment...on the highway. She's okay, but...I think...I think he's going to hurt her."

"Send it to Huiling," Io said, grinning to herself as she imagined the look on Yuniko's face after receiving that instruction. "Boss lady's assigning our stuff to her and Xiu Mei until we're done here."

"But...that...you can't be serious."

"This job's got top priority now, Yuni-chan. Send them what you can, disconnect, and get here. Without complaints, if at all possible."

"Idiot," Yuniko muttered into her receiver.

"I love you too. And Yuni-chan? Make sure to bring *all* your gear, okay?"

Yuniko's expression tightened. *Bring all your gear* meant that she had to bring her entire array of laptops. It also meant that she had to bring her gun. On most assignments, it was never necessary.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yeah...yeah," Yuniko's frantic speech slowed itself to a crawl. "I'll...I'll call you when I'm on my way."

Io ended the call. Shards of rain began whipping against the pane of her hotel window. Downtown's red glow, lurking nine stories below her, reached up to embrace her. Head and brake lights of cars stuck in rush hour traffic formed a festive chain of impromptu holiday illumination. Through the rain-soaked glass, the image took on a blurred, surreal quality, canvassing reality into an abstract painting ready for display at the Art Institute two blocks away.

Nervous, cautious eyes shifted toward the west. The fog of rain and downtown's rush hour madness silhouetted the Grecian contours of Chicago's Field Museum a mile away. Soft orbs of dim, hazy light lined the monolith, making it glow like a forgotten lighthouse among downtown's sea of steel and plastic. Indented shadows cast from the museum's marble steps stretched and sprawled from the main body. The 24 steps leading to the museum's south entrance, Io knew intimately. Nine years prior, accompanied by a man whose name she'd since forgotten, she'd ascended all 24 and entered the museum and its promise of normalcy.

Nine years later, normalcy had faded into dream and longing. The museum's 24 steps remained. She visited them every time she returned to Chicago, intent on ascending them once more and exorcising one of her countless demons. She never made it past the twelfth.

Staring hard at the steps she knew were hiding behind the shroud of rain, Io winced as she imagined a version of herself skipping up them, happily stomping through the archipelago of rainwater puddles, caring little about anything beyond the museum's 5 p.m. closing hour and its \$12 admission. Fantasy became torment, conjuring phantoms of a dead would-be husband and an unborn, faceless child ascending the 24 steps with her. She bit her lip. Neither the phantom husband nor their phantom child had seen the museum with her. Neither would. The museum's cold emptiness would alone greet her ascension.

Twenty forgotten minutes passed. Heavy rain, pelting hard against the window, shattered Io's fantasies. Her phantoms remained entombed in the Field Museum with the rest of its memories and exhibits.

She drew the thick curtains closed and turned on the lamp on the nearest dresser. The hotel's light bulb managed a dim, labored glow. Years-old guilt made her look at a familiar paperback tossed beside the lamp. *The House on Mango Street* invited her to read its creased pages beneath its torn, withered paperback cover. It always did. Across the stretch of insomniac nights in her apartment and forgotten motel rooms, it always asked to be read. In 14 years, she had yet to accept its invitation. She turned away and began to remove her wet boots. Her father's remembered words reprimanded her continued negligence of the most basic of Japanese etiquette.

Io sat on the edge of her bed, the only part of it not stacked with boxes of ammunition and her weapons. Two older, Mexican-made Obregon 9mm pistols. Her *wakizashi* sword, a sleek, black-hilted heirloom braided in red *ito*, its 15-inch blade guarded by a bronze oval *tsuba*. Its lacquered, black *saya*, tipped with a bronze *kashira*, concealed the blade, turning the lethal samurai weapon harmlessly decorative to the casual observer. An FX-05 Xiuhcoatl semi-automatic assault rifle, smuggled into the U.S. after the Mexican Civil War. Her choice of weapons reflected the same nationalistic preferences and biases common among all Editors, preferences that seemed to make little sense to anyone else. No gun encyclopedia or magazine ever touted the Mexican-made Xiuhcoatl assault rifle as anything beyond serviceable. In her hands, it was best-in-class.

Io, *La Azteca Samurai*, picked up her Xiuhcoatl. In the dim silence of her hotel room, her hands moved in measured precision, disassembling the cold polymer of their master's favorite tool, cleaning its barrel and its firing chamber, her serene brown eyes gazing past their familiar, mechanized routine.

Like pouncing, demonic eyes, the brake lights of the vehicle ahead lanced toward her.

Io slammed on her brakes. She swore to herself. She glared at the driver two cars down. Oblivious, he'd cut into the lane and forced the SUV in front of her to brake suddenly. The traffic light ahead turned red, and every car's brake lights followed in step. Lingered frustration over the heavy 8 p.m. traffic had already gnawed at her patience; the third red light on the same street devoured what was left of it.

On her car's radio, a bubbly male voice peddled diet pills with an unpronounceable name he swore had helped him lose 20 pounds in a week. It was the fifth commercial between the ten songs promised without commercial interruption. Exasperated, Io turned the radio off. The rain outside continued to lash away at her windshield, blurring the sea of red lights ahead. The rhythmic delay of her windshield wipers tried to lull her to sleep, making her regret her decision to leave her hotel room a full 14 hours before normal check-out. Restlessness had nudged her out of its rented \$125-a-night coziness, as if part of her worried that Detroit would not still be there in the morning. Now, it was too late to turn back. That restlessness would return, bringing with it its usual bout of insomnia.

The light ahead turned green. But cars from the other street rushing to beat their own red light blocked the intersection. Several drivers honked in pointless frustration. Io tapped her hands against her steering wheel.

Her cell phone's monotone ring blared out.

Io startled and immediately made up her mind to ignore the call. But her cell phone, nestled in its slot on her center console, continued to blare out. Loudly. Her cabin seemed to amplify its electronic shriek beyond her closed windows, echoing it as a schizophrenic, disharmonic chorus. Top 40 songs and synthesized ragtime ditties wailed at one another. Country music hits scuffled against Latin Salsa. Trademarked ring tones intruded upon sampled renditions of Beethoven and Mozart. Famous movie quotes yelled at each other. Tropical birds chirped as a throng of bees buzzed and vibrated in eerie unison. Her ear drums felt ready to burst.

The drivers in the cars ahead of her fidgeted and fumbled. She looked to her left. A man in a soaked raincoat was looking at his cell phone, then looking up and all around him. Another man next to him did the same, his lips silently voicing a question. She turned to her right. Several pedestrians huddled inside a bus canopy were staring with disbelieving eyes at their own cell phones. Blinking incoming call lights across the digital spectrum formed new constellations throughout Ohio Street. Io rolled down her window.

The sounds of idling cars, stalled traffic, and downtown's holiday bustle were drowned out in the cacophonous avalanche of cell phone rings and synthesized melodies.