



## CHAPTER 1

### Aomame

#### DON'T LET APPEARANCES FOOL YOU

The taxi's radio was tuned to a classical FM broadcast. Janáček's *Sinfonietta*—probably not the ideal music to hear in a taxi caught in traffic. The middle-aged driver didn't seem to be listening very closely, either. With his mouth clamped shut, he stared straight ahead at the endless line of cars stretching out on the elevated expressway, like a veteran fisherman standing in the bow of his boat, reading the ominous confluence of two currents. Aomame settled into the broad back seat, closed her eyes, and listened to the music.

How many people could recognize Janáček's *Sinfonietta* after hearing just the first few bars? Probably somewhere between “very few” and “almost none.” But for some reason, Aomame was one of the few who could.

Janáček composed his little symphony in 1926. He originally wrote the opening as a fanfare for a gymnastics

originally from the opening to Aomame for a generation festival. Aomame imagined 1926 Czechoslovakia: The First World War had ended, and the country was freed from the long rule of the Hapsburg Dynasty. As they enjoyed the peaceful respite visiting central Europe, people drank Pilsner beer in cafés and manufactured handsome light machine guns. Two years earlier, in utter obscurity, Franz Kafka had left the world behind. Soon Hitler would come out of nowhere and gobble up this beautiful little country in the blink of an eye, but at the time no one knew what hardships lay in store for them. This may be the most important proposition revealed by history: "At the time, no one knew what was coming." Listening to Janáček's music, Aomame imagined the carefree winds sweeping across the plains of Bohemia and thought about the vicissitudes of history.

In 1926 Japan's Taisho Emperor died, and the era name was changed to Showa. It was the beginning of a terrible, dark time in this country, too. The short interlude of modernism and democracy was ending, giving way to fascism.

Aomame loved history as much as she loved sports. She rarely read fiction, but history books could keep her occupied for hours. What she liked about history was the way all its facts were linked with particular dates and places. She did not find it especially difficult to remember historical dates. Even if she did not learn them by rote memorization, once she grasped the relationship of an event to its time and to the events preceding and following it, the date would come to her automatically. In both middle school and high school, she had always gotten the top grade on history exams. It puzzled her to hear someone say he had trouble learning dates. How could something so simple be a problem for anyone?

"Aomame" was her real name. Her grandfather on her father's side came from some little mountain town or village in Fukushima Prefecture, where there were supposedly a number of people who bore the name.

written with exactly the same characters as the word for “green peas” and pronounced with the same four syllables, “Ah-oh-mah-meh.” She had never been to the place, however. Her father had cut his ties with his family before her birth, just as her mother had done with her own family, so she had never met any of her grandparents. She didn’t travel much, but on those rare occasions when she stayed in an unfamiliar city or town, she would always open the hotel’s phone book to see if there were any Aomames in the area. She had never found a single one, and whenever she tried and failed, she felt like a lonely castaway on the open sea.

Telling people her name was always a bother. As soon as the name left her lips, the other person looked puzzled or confused.

“Miss Aomame?”

“Yes. Just like ‘green peas.’ ”

Employers required her to have business cards printed, which only made things worse. People would stare at the card as if she had thrust a letter at them bearing bad news. When she announced her name on the telephone, she would often hear suppressed laughter. In waiting rooms at the doctor’s or at public offices, people would look up at the sound of her name, curious to see what someone called “Green Peas” could look like.

Some people would get the name of the plant wrong and call her “Edamame” or “Soramame,” whereupon she would gently correct them: “No, I’m not soybeans or fava beans, just green peas. Pretty close, though. Aomame.” How many times in her thirty years had she heard the same remarks, the same feeble jokes about her name? *My life might have been totally different if I hadn’t been born with this name. If I had had an ordinary name like Sato or Tanaka or Suzuki, I could have lived a slightly more relaxed life or looked at people with somewhat more forgiving eyes. Perhaps.*

Eyes closed. Aomame listened to the music, allowing

the lovely unison of the brasses to sink into her brain. Just then it occurred to her that the sound quality was too good for a radio in a taxicab. Despite the rather low volume at which it was playing, the sound had true depth, and the overtones were clearly audible. She opened her eyes and leaned forward to study the dashboard stereo. The jet-black device shone with a proud gloss. She couldn't make out its brand name, but it was obviously high end, with lots of knobs and switches, the green numerals of the station readout clear against the black panel. This was not the kind of stereo you expected to see in an ordinary fleet cab.

She looked around at the cab's interior. She had been too absorbed in her own thoughts to notice until now, but this was no ordinary taxi. The high quality of the trim was evident, and the seat was especially comfortable. Above all, it was quiet. The car probably had extra sound insulation to keep noise out, like a soundproofed music studio. The driver probably owned his own cab. Many such owner-drivers would spare no expense on the upkeep of their automobiles. Moving only her eyes, Aomame searched for the driver's registration card, without success. This did not seem to be an illegal unlicensed cab, though. It had a standard taxi meter, which was ticking off the proper fare: 2,150 yen so far. Still, the registration card showing the driver's name was nowhere to be found.

"What a nice car," Aomame said, speaking to the driver's back. "So quiet. What kind is it?"

"Toyota Crown Royal Saloon," the driver replied succinctly.

"The music sounds great in here."

"It's a very quiet car. That's one reason I chose it. Toyota has some of the best sound-insulating technology in the world."

Aomame nodded and leaned back in her seat. There was something about the driver's way of speaking that

bothered her, as though he were leaving something important unsaid. For example (and this is just one example), his remark on Toyota's impeccable sound insulation might be taken to mean that some other Toyota feature was less than impeccable. And each time he finished a sentence, there was a tiny but meaningful lump of silence left behind. This lump floated there, enclosed in the car's restricted space like an imaginary miniature cloud, giving Aomame a strangely unsettled feeling.

"It certainly is a quiet car," Aomame declared, as if to sweep the little cloud away. "And the stereo looks especially fine."

"Decisiveness was key when I bought it," the driver said, like a retired staff officer explaining a past military success. "I have to spend so much time in here, I want the best sound available. And—"

Aomame waited for what was to follow, but nothing followed. She closed her eyes again and concentrated on the music. She knew nothing about Janáček as a person, but she was quite sure that he never imagined that in 1984 someone would be listening to his composition in a hushed Toyota Crown Royal Saloon on the gridlocked elevated Metropolitan Expressway in Tokyo.

Why, though, Aomame wondered, had she instantly recognized the piece to be Janáček's *Sinfonietta*? And how did she know it had been composed in 1926? She was not a classical music fan, and she had no personal recollections involving Janáček, yet the moment she heard the opening bars, all her knowledge of the piece came to her by reflex, like a flock of birds swooping through an open window. The music gave her an odd, wrenching kind of feeling. There was no pain or unpleasantness involved, just a sensation that all the elements of her body were being physically wrung out. Aomame had no idea what was going on. *Could Sinfonietta actually be giving me this weird feeling?*

"Janáček," Aomame said half-consciously, though

after the word emerged from her lips, she wanted to take it back.

“What’s that, ma’am?”

“Janáček. The man who wrote this music.”

“Never heard of him.”

“Czech composer.”

“Well-well,” the driver said, seemingly impressed.

“Do you own this cab?” Aomame asked, hoping to change the subject.

“I do,” the driver answered. After a brief pause, he added, “It’s all mine. My second one.”

“Very comfortable seats.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Turning his head slightly in her direction, he asked, “By the way, are you in a hurry?”

“I have to meet someone in Shibuya. That’s why I asked you to take the expressway.”

“What time is your meeting?”

“Four thirty,” Aomame said.

“Well, it’s already three forty-five. You’ll never make it.”

“Is the backup that bad?”

“Looks like a major accident up ahead. This is no ordinary traffic jam. We’ve hardly moved for quite a while.”

She wondered why the driver was not listening to traffic reports. The expressway had been brought to a standstill. He should be listening to updates on the taxi drivers’ special radio station.

“You can tell it’s an accident without hearing a traffic report?” Aomame asked.

“You can’t trust them,” he said with a hollow ring to his voice. “They’re half lies. The Expressway Corporation only releases reports that suit its agenda. If you really want to know what’s happening here and now, you’ve got to use your own eyes and your own judgment.”

“And your judgment tells you that we’ll be stuck

here?”

“For quite a while,” the driver said with a nod. “I can guarantee you that. When it backs up solid like this, the expressway is sheer hell. Is your meeting an important one?”

Aomame gave it some thought. “Yes, very. I have to see a client.”

“That’s a shame. You’re probably not going to make it.”

The driver shook his head a few times as if trying to ease a stiff neck. The wrinkles on the back of his neck moved like some kind of ancient creature. Half-consciously watching the movement, Aomame found herself thinking of the sharp object in the bottom of her shoulder bag. A touch of sweat came to her palms.

“What do you think I should do?” she asked.

“There’s nothing you *can* do up here on the expressway—not until we get to the next exit. If we were down on the city streets, you could just step out of the cab and take the subway.”

“What is the next exit?”

“Ikejiri. We might not get there before the sun goes down, though.”

Before the sun goes down? Aomame imagined herself locked in this cab until sunset. The Janáček was still playing. Muted strings came to the foreground as if to soothe her heightened anxiety. That earlier wrenching sensation had largely subsided. What could that have been?

Aomame had caught the cab near Kinuta and told the driver to take the elevated expressway from Yohga. The flow of traffic had been smooth at first, but suddenly backed up just before Sangenjaya, after which they had hardly moved. The outbound lanes were moving fine. Only the side headed toward downtown Tokyo was tragically jammed. Inbound Expressway Number 3 would not normally back up at three in the afternoon,



which was why Aomame had directed the driver to take it.

“Time charges don’t add up on the expressway,” the driver said, speaking toward his rearview mirror. “So don’t let the fare worry you. I suppose you need to get to your meeting, though?”

“Yes, of course. But there’s nothing I can do about it, is there?”

He glanced at her in the mirror. He was wearing pale sunglasses. The way the light was shining in, Aomame could not make out his expression.

“Well, in fact, there might be a way. You *could* take the subway to Shibuya from here, but you’d have to do something a little . . . extreme.”

“Something extreme?”

“It’s not something I can openly advise you to do.”

Aomame said nothing. She waited for more with narrowed eyes.

“Look over there. See that turnout just ahead?” he asked, pointing. “See? Near that Esso sign.”

Aomame strained to see through the windshield until she focused on a space to the left of the two-lane roadway where broken-down cars could pull off. The elevated roadway had no shoulder but instead had emergency turnouts at regular intervals. Aomame saw that the turnout was outfitted with a yellow emergency phone box for contacting the Metropolitan Expressway Public Corporation office. The turnout itself was empty at the moment. On top of a building beyond the oncoming lanes there was a big billboard advertising Esso gasoline with a smiling tiger holding a gas hose.

“To tell you the truth, there’s a stairway leading from the turnout down to street level. It’s for drivers who have to abandon their cars in a fire or earthquake and climb down to the street. Usually only maintenance workers use it. If you were to climb down that stairway, you’d be near a Tokyu Line station. From there, it’s nothing to

Shibuya.”

“I had no idea these Metropolitan Expressways had emergency stairs,” Aomame said.

“Not many people do.”

“But wouldn’t I get in trouble using it without permission when there’s no real emergency?”

The driver paused a moment. Then he said, “I wonder. I don’t know all the rules of the Corporation, but you wouldn’t be hurting anybody. They’d probably look the other way, don’t you think? Anyway, they don’t have people watching every exit. The Metropolitan Expressway Public Corporation is famous for having a huge staff but nobody really doing any work.”

“What kind of stairway is it?”

“Hmm, kind of like a fire escape. You know, like the ones you see on the backs of old buildings. It’s not especially dangerous or anything. It’s maybe three stories high, and you just climb down. There’s a barrier at the opening, but it’s not very high. Anybody who wanted to could get over it easily.”

“Have you ever used one of these stairways?”

Instead of replying, the driver directed a faint smile toward his rearview mirror, a smile that could be read any number of ways.

“It’s strictly up to you,” he said, tapping lightly on the steering wheel in time to the music. “If you just want to sit here and relax and enjoy the music, I’m fine with that. We might as well resign ourselves to the fact that we’re not going anywhere soon. All I’m saying is that there *are* emergency measures you can take if you have urgent business.”

Aomame frowned and glanced at her watch. She looked up and studied the surrounding cars. On the right was a black Mitsubishi Pajero wagon with a thin layer of white dust. A bored-looking young man in the front passenger seat was smoking a cigarette with his window open. He had long hair, a tanned face, and wore a dark

red windbreaker. The car's luggage compartment was filled with a number of worn surfboards. In front of him was a gray Saab 900, its dark-tinted windows closed tight, preventing any glimpse of who might be inside. The body was so immaculately polished, you could probably see your face in it.

The car ahead was a red Suzuki Alto with a Nerima Ward license plate and a dented bumper. A young mother sat gripping the wheel. Her small child was standing on the seat next to her, moving back and forth to dispel its boredom. The mother's annoyance showed on her face as she cautioned the child to keep still. Aomame could see her mouth moving. The scene was unchanged from ten minutes earlier. In those ten minutes, the car had probably advanced less than ten yards.

Aomame thought hard, arranging everything in order of priority. She needed hardly any time to reach a conclusion. As if to coincide with this, the final movement of the Janáček was just beginning.

She pulled her small Ray-Ban sunglasses partway out of her shoulder bag and took three thousand-yen bills from her wallet. Handing the bills to the driver, she said, "I'll get out here. I really can't be late for this appointment."

The driver nodded and took the money. "Would you like a receipt?"

"No need. And keep the change."

"Thanks very much," he said. "Be careful, it looks windy out there. Don't slip."

"I'll be careful," Aomame said.

"And also," the driver said, facing the mirror, "please remember: things are not what they seem."

*Things are not what they seem*, Aomame repeated mentally. "What do you mean by that?" she asked with knitted brows.

The driver chose his words carefully: "It's just that you're about to do something *out of the ordinary*. Am I

right? People do not ordinarily climb down the emergency stairs of the Metropolitan Expressway in the middle of the day—especially women.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Right. And after you *do* something like that, the everyday *look* of things might seem to change a little. Things may look *different* to you than they did before. I’ve had that experience myself. But don’t let appearances fool you. There’s always only one reality.”

Aomame thought about what he was saying, and in the course of her thinking, the Janáček ended and the audience broke into immediate applause. This was obviously a live recording. The applause was long and enthusiastic. There were even occasional calls of “Bravo!” She imagined the smiling conductor bowing repeatedly to the standing audience. He would then raise his head, raise his arms, shake hands with the concertmaster, turn away from the audience, raise his arms again in praise of the orchestra, face front, and take another deep bow. As she listened to the long recorded applause, it sounded less like applause and more like an endless Martian sandstorm.

“There is always, as I said, only one reality,” the driver repeated slowly, as if underlining an important passage in a book.

“Of course,” Aomame said. He was right. A physical object could only be in one place at one time. Einstein proved that. Reality was utterly coolheaded and utterly lonely.

Aomame pointed toward the car stereo. “Great sound.”

The driver nodded. “What was the name of that composer again?”

“Janáček.”

“Janáček,” the driver repeated, as if committing an important password to memory. Then he pulled the lever that opened the passenger door. “Be careful,” he said. “I

hope you get to your appointment on time.”

Aomame stepped out of the cab, gripping the strap of her large leather shoulder bag. The applause was still going. She started walking carefully along the left edge of the elevated road toward the emergency turnout some ten meters ahead. Each time a large truck roared by on the opposite side, she felt the surface of the road shake—or, rather, undulate—through her high heels, as if she were walking on the deck of an aircraft carrier on a stormy sea.

The little girl in the front seat of the red Suzuki Alto stuck her head out of her window and stared, open-mouthed, at Aomame passing by. Then she turned to her mother and asked, “Mommy, what is that lady doing? Where’s she going? I want to get out and walk too. Please, Mommy! Pleecease!” The mother responded to her cries in silence, shaking her head and shooting an accusatory glance at Aomame. The girl’s loud pleading and the mother’s glance were the only responses to her that Aomame noticed. The other drivers just sat at the wheel smoking and watching her make her way with determined steps between the cars and the side wall. They knit their brows and squinted as if looking at a too-bright object but seemed to have temporarily suspended all judgment. For someone to be walking on the Metropolitan Expressway was by no means an everyday event, with or without the usual flow of traffic, so it took them some time to process the sight as an actual occurrence—all the more so because the walker was a young woman in high heels and a miniskirt.

Aomame pulled in her chin, kept her gaze fixed straight ahead, her back straight, and her pace steady. Her chestnut-colored Charles Jourdan heels clicked against the road’s surface, and the skirts of her coat waved in the breeze. April had begun, but there was still a chill in the air and a hint of roughness to come. Aomame wore a beige spring coat over her green light

wool Junko Shimada suit. A black leather bag hung over her shoulder, and her shoulder-length hair was impeccably trimmed and shaped. She wore no accessories of any kind. Five foot six inches tall, she carried not an ounce of excess fat. Every muscle in her body was well toned, but her coat kept that fact hidden.

A detailed examination of her face from the front would reveal that the size and shape of her ears were significantly different, the left one much bigger and malformed. No one ever noticed this, however, because her hair nearly always covered her ears. Her lips formed a tight straight line, suggesting that she was not easily approachable. Also contributing to this impression were her small, narrow nose, somewhat protruding cheekbones, broad forehead, and long, straight eyebrows. All of these were arranged to sit in a pleasing oval shape, however, and while tastes differ, few would object to calling her a beautiful woman. The one problem with her face was its extreme paucity of expression. Her firmly closed lips only formed a smile when absolutely necessary. Her eyes had the cool, vigilant stare of a superior deck officer. Thanks to these features, no one ever had a vivid impression of her face. She attracted attention not so much because of the qualities of her features but rather because of the naturalness and grace with which her expression moved. In that sense, Aomame resembled an insect skilled at biological mimicry. What she most wanted was to blend in with her background by changing color and shape, to remain inconspicuous and not easily remembered. This was how she had protected herself since childhood.

Whenever something caused her to frown or grimace, however, her features underwent dramatic changes. The muscles of her face tightened, pulling in several directions at once and emphasizing the lack of symmetry in the overall structure. Deep wrinkles formed in her skin, her eyes suddenly drew inward, her nose and mouth became

violently distorted, her jaw twisted to the side, and her lips curled back, exposing Aomame's large white teeth. Instantly, she became a wholly different person, as if a cord had broken, dropping the mask that normally covered her face. The shocking transformation terrified anyone who saw it, so she was careful never to frown in the presence of a stranger. She would contort her face only when she was alone or when she was threatening a man who displeased her.

Reaching the turnout, Aomame stopped and looked around. It took only a moment for her to find the emergency stairway. As the driver had said, there was a metal barrier across the entrance. It was a little more than waist high, and it was locked. Stepping over it in a tight miniskirt could be a slight problem, but only if she cared about being seen. Without hesitating, she slipped her high heels off and shoved them into her shoulder bag. She would probably ruin her stockings by walking in bare feet, but she could easily buy another pair.

People stared at her in silence as she removed her shoes and coat. From the open window of the black Toyota Celica parked next to the turnout, Michael Jackson's high-pitched voice provided her with background music. "Billie Jean" was playing. She felt as if she were performing a striptease. *So what? Let them look all they want. They must be bored waiting for the traffic jam to end. Sorry, though, folks, this is all I'll be taking off today.*

Aomame slung the bag across her chest to keep it from falling. Some distance away she could see the brand-new black Toyota Crown Royal Saloon in which she had been riding, its windshield reflecting the blinding glare of the afternoon sun. She could not make out the face of the driver, but she knew he must be watching.

**Don't let appearances fool you. There's always only one reality.**

Aomame took in a long, deep breath, and slowly let it

out. I men, to the tune of "Blue Jean," she swung her leg over the metal barrier. Her miniskirt rode up to her hips. *Who gives a damn? Let them look all they want. Seeing what's under my skirt doesn't let them really see me as a person.* Besides, her legs were the part of her body of which Aomame was the most proud.

Stepping down once she was on the other side of the barrier, Aomame straightened her skirt, brushed the dust from her hands, put her coat back on, slung her bag across her chest again, and pushed her sunglasses more snugly against her face. The emergency stairway lay before her—a metal stairway painted gray. Plain, practical, functional. Not made for use by miniskirted women wearing only stockings on their otherwise bare feet. Nor had Junko Shimada designed Aomame's suit for use on the emergency escape stairs of Tokyo Metropolitan Expressway Number 3. Another huge truck roared down the outbound side of the expressway, shaking the stairs. The breeze whistled through gaps in the stairway's metal framework. But in any case, there it was, before her: the stairway. All that was left for her to do was climb down to the street.

Aomame turned for one last look at the double line of cars packed on the expressway, scanning them from left to right, then right to left, like a speaker on a podium looking for questions from the audience, now that she had finished her talk. There had been no movement at all. Trapped on the expressway with nothing else to occupy them, people were watching her every move, wondering what this woman on the far side of the barrier would do next. Aomame lightly pulled in her chin, bit her lower lip, and took stock of her audience through the dark green lenses of her sunglasses.

*You couldn't begin to imagine who I am, where I'm going, or what I'm about to do,* Aomame said to her audience without moving her lips. *All of you are trapped here. You can't go anywhere, forward or*



*back. But I'm not like you. I have work to do. I have a mission to accomplish. And so, with your permission, I shall move ahead.*

Aomame had the urge at the end to treat her assembled throng to one of her special scowls, but she managed to stop herself. There was no time for such things now. Once she let herself frown, it took both time and effort to regain her original expression.

Aomame turned her back on her silent audience and, with careful steps, began to descend the emergency stairway, feeling the chill of the crude metal rungs against the soles of her feet. Also chilling was the early April breeze, which swept her hair back now and then, revealing her misshapen left ear.

## CHAPTER 2

### Tengo

#### SOMETHING ELSE IN MIND

Tengo's first memory dated from the time he was one and a half. His mother had taken off her blouse and dropped the shoulder straps of her white slip to let a man who was not his father suck on her breasts. The infant in the crib nearby was probably Tengo himself. He was observing the scene as a third person. Or could the infant have been his twin? No, not likely. It was one-and-a-half-year-old Tengo. He knew this intuitively. The infant

was asleep, its eyes closed, its little breaths deep and regular. The vivid ten-second scene was seared into the wall of his consciousness, his earliest memory in life. Nothing came before or after it. It stood out alone, like the steeple of a town visited by a flood, thrusting up above the muddy water.

Tengo made a point of asking people how old they were at the time of their first memory. For most people it was four or five. Three at the very earliest. A child had to be at least three to begin observing a surrounding scene with a degree of rationality. In the stage before that, everything registered as incomprehensible chaos. The world was a mushy bowl of loose gruel, lacking framework or handholds. It flowed past our open windows without forming memories in the brain.

Surely a one-and-a-half-year-old infant was unable to grasp what it meant for a man who was not his father to be sucking his mother's breasts. That much was clear. So if this memory of Tengo's was genuine, the scene must have been seared into his retinas as a pure image free of judgment—the way a camera records objects on film, mechanically, as a blend of light and shadow. And as his consciousness matured, the fixed image held in reserve would have been analyzed bit by bit, and meaning applied to it. But is such a thing even possible? Was the infant brain capable of preserving images like that?

Or was this simply a false memory of Tengo's? Was it just something that his mind had later decided—for whatever purpose or plan—to make up on its own? Tengo had given plenty of thought to the possibility that this memory might be a fabrication, but he had arrived at the conclusion that it probably was not. It was too vivid and too deeply compelling to be fake. The light, the smells, the beating of his heart: these felt overwhelmingly real, not like imitations. And besides, it explained many things—both logically and emotionally—to assume that

the scene was real.

This vivid ten-second image would come to him without warning and without consideration of either time or place. He could be riding on the subway or writing formulas on the blackboard or having a meal or (as now) sitting and talking to someone across a table, and it would envelop him like a soundless tsunami. By the time he noticed, it would be directly in front of him, and his arms and legs would be paralyzed. The flow of time stopped. The air grew thin, and he had trouble breathing. He lost all connection with the people and things around him. The tsunami's liquid wall swallowed him whole. And though it felt to him as if the world were being closed off in darkness, he experienced no loss of awareness. It was just a sense of having been switched to a new track. Parts of his mind were, if anything, sharpened by the change. He felt no terror, but he could not keep his eyes open. His eyelids were clamped shut. Sounds grew distant, and the familiar image was projected onto the screen of his consciousness again and again. Sweat gushed from every part of his body and the armpits of his undershirt grew damp. He trembled all over, and his heartbeat grew faster and louder.

If he was with someone when it happened, Tengo would feign momentary dizziness. It was, in fact, like a dizzy spell. Everything would return to normal in time. He would pull his handkerchief from his pocket and press it to his mouth. Waiting for the "dizziness" to pass, he would raise a hand to signal to the other person that it was nothing to worry about. Sometimes it would all be over in thirty seconds, at other times it went on for over a minute. As long as it lasted, the same image would be repeated as if on a tape machine set on automatic. His mother would drop her shoulder straps and some man would start sucking on her hardened nipples. She would close her eyes and heave a deep sigh. The warm, familiar scent of mother's milk hovered faintly in the air. Smell is

an infant's most acute sense. The sense of sight reveals a great deal—sometimes it reveals everything. The scene was soundless, the air a dense liquid. All he could hear was the soft beating of his own heart.

*Look at this, they say. Look at this and nothing else, they say. You are here. You can't go anywhere else, they say.* The message is played over and over.

This “attack” was a long one. Tengo closed his eyes, covered his mouth with his handkerchief as always, and gritted his teeth. He had no idea how long it went on. All he could do was guess, based on how worn out he felt afterward. He felt physically drained, more fatigued than he had ever felt before. Some time had to go by before he could open his eyes. His mind wanted to wake up, but his muscles and internal organs resisted. He might as well have been a hibernating animal trying to wake up in the wrong season.

“Tengo, Tengo!” someone was calling. The muffled voice seemed to reach him from the depths of a cave. It finally dawned on Tengo that he was hearing his own name. “What’s wrong, Tengo? Is it happening to you again? Are you all right?” The voice sounded closer now.

Tengo finally opened his eyes, managed to focus them, and stared at his own right hand gripping the edge of the table. Now he could be sure that the world still existed in one piece and that he was still a part of it. Some numbness remained, but the hand was certainly his. So, too, was the smell of sweat emanating from him, an oddly harsh odor like a zoo animal’s.

His throat was dry. Tengo reached for the glass on the table and drank half its contents, carefully trying not to spill any. After a momentary rest to catch his breath, he drank the remainder. His mind was gradually coming back to where it belonged and his senses were returning to normal. He set the empty glass down and wiped his mouth with his handkerchief.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m okay now”

He knew that the man across from him was Komatsu and that they had been talking at a café near Tokyo’s Shinjuku Station. The sounds of other nearby conversations now sounded like normal voices. The couple at the neighboring table were staring at him, obviously concerned. The waitress stood by with a worried expression on her face as though she expected her customer to vomit. Tengo looked up and nodded to her, smiling as if to signal, “Don’t worry, no problem.”

“That wasn’t some kind of *fit*, was it?” Komatsu asked.

“No, it’s nothing, a kind of dizzy spell. A bad one,” Tengo replied. His voice still didn’t sound like his own, though it was getting closer.

“It’d be terrible if that happened while you were driving or something,” Komatsu said, looking directly at him.

“I don’t drive.”

“That’s good. I know a guy with a cedar pollen allergy who started sneezing at the wheel and smashed into a telephone pole. Of course, your thing is not just sneezing. I was shocked the first time. I’m more or less used to it now, though.”

“Sorry.”

Tengo picked up his coffee cup and gulped down what was left. He tasted nothing, just felt some lukewarm liquid passing down his throat.

“Want to order another glass of water?” Komatsu asked.

Tengo shook his head. “No, I’m okay now.”

Komatsu took a pack of Marlboros from his jacket pocket, put one in his mouth, and lit up with the café’s matches. Then he glanced at his watch.

“What were we talking about again?” Tengo asked, trying to get back to normal.

“Good question,” Komatsu said, staring off into space.

thinking—or pretending to. Tengo could not be sure which. There was a good deal of acting involved in the way Komatsu spoke and gestured. “That’s it—the girl Fuka-Eri. We were just getting started on her and *Air Chrysalis*.”

Tengo nodded. That was it. He was just beginning to give his opinion on Fuka-Eri and her novella, *Air Chrysalis*, when the “attack” hit him.

Komatsu said, “I was going to tell you about that odd one-word pen name of hers.”

“It is odd, isn’t it? The ‘Fuka’ sounds like part of a family name, and the ‘Eri’ could be an ordinary girl’s name: ‘Eri’ or ‘Eriko.’ ”

“That’s exactly what it is. Her family name is ‘Fukada,’ and her real first name is ‘Eriko,’ so she put them together: ‘Fuka’ plus ‘Eri’ equals ‘Fuka-Eri.’ ”

Tengo pulled the manuscript from his briefcase and laid it on the table, resting his hand atop the sheaf of paper to reaffirm its presence.

“As I mentioned briefly on the phone, the best thing about this *Air Chrysalis* is that it’s not an imitation of anyone. It has absolutely none of the usual new writer’s sense of ‘I want to be another so-and-so.’ The style, for sure, is rough, and the writing is clumsy. She even gets the title wrong: she’s confusing ‘chrysalis’ and ‘cocoon.’ You could pick it apart completely if you wanted to. But the story itself has real power: it draws you in. The overall plot is a fantasy, but the descriptive detail is incredibly real. The balance between the two is excellent. I don’t know if words like ‘originality’ or ‘inevitability’ fit here, and I suppose I might agree if someone insisted it’s not at that level, but finally, after you work your way through the thing, with all its faults, it leaves a real impression—it *gets* to you in some strange, inexplicable way that may be a little disturbing.”

Komatsu kept his eyes on Tengo, saying nothing. He was waiting to hear more.

Tengo went on. "I'd hate to see this thing dropped from the competition just because the style is clumsy. I've read tons of submissions over the years—or maybe I should say 'skimmed' rather than 'read.' A few of them were fairly well written, of course, but most of them were just awful. And out of all those manuscripts, this *Air Chrysalis* is the only one that moved me the least bit. It's the only one that ever made me want to read it again."

"Well, well," Komatsu said, and then, as if he found this all rather boring, he released a stream of smoke through his pursed lips. Tengo had known Komatsu too long to be deceived by such a display, however. Komatsu was a man who often adopted an expression that was either unrelated to—or exactly the opposite of—what he was actually feeling. And so Tengo was prepared to wait him out.

"I read it, too," Komatsu said after a short pause. "Right after you called me. The writing is incredibly bad. It's ungrammatical, and in some places you have no idea what she's trying to say. She should go back to school and learn how to write a decent sentence before she starts writing fiction."

"But you *did* read it to the end, didn't you?"

Komatsu smiled. It was the kind of smile he might have found way in the back of a normally unopened drawer. "You're right, I did read it all the way through—much to my own surprise. I *never* read these new writer prize submissions from beginning to end. I even *reread* some parts of this one. Let's just say the planets were in perfect alignment. I'll grant it that much."

"Which means it *has* something, don't you think?"

Komatsu set his cigarette in an ashtray and rubbed the side of his nose with the middle finger of his right hand. He did not, however, answer Tengo's question.

Tengo said, "She's just seventeen, a high school kid. She still doesn't have the discipline to read and write fiction, that's all. It's practically impossible for this work

to take the new writers' prize, I know, but it's good enough to put on the short list. *You* can make that happen, I'm sure. So then she can win next time."

"Hmm," Komatsu said with another noncommittal answer and a yawn. He took a drink from his water glass. "Think about it, Tengu. Imagine if I put it on the short list. The members of the selection committee would faint—or more likely have a shit fit. But they would definitely not read it all the way through. All four of them are active writers, busy with their own work. They'd skim the first couple of pages and toss it out as if it were some grade school composition. I could plead with them to give it another try, and guarantee them it would be brilliant with a little polishing here and there, but who's going to listen to me? Even supposing I could 'make it happen,' I'd only want to do that for something with more promise."

"So you're saying we should drop it just like that?"

"No, that is not what I'm saying," Komatsu said, rubbing the side of his nose. "I've got something else in mind for this story."

"Something else in mind," Tengu said. He sensed something ominous in Komatsu's tone.

"You're saying we should count on her *next* work as a winner," Komatsu said. "I'd like to be able to do that, too, of course. One of an editor's greatest joys is nurturing a young writer over time. It's a thrill to look at the clear night sky and discover a new star before anybody else sees it. But to tell you the truth, Tengu, I don't believe this girl *has* a next work in her. Not to boast, but I've been making my living in this business for twenty years now. I've seen writers come and go. And if I've learned anything, it's how to tell the difference between writers who *have* a next work in them, and those who don't. And if you ask me, this girl doesn't have one. Her next work is not going to make it, and neither will the one after that or the one after that. First of



all, look at this style. No amount of work is going to make it any better. It's never going to happen. And the reason it's never going to happen is that the writer herself doesn't give a damn about style: she shows absolutely no *intention* of wanting to write well, of wanting to improve her writing. Good style happens in one of two ways: the writer either has an inborn talent or is willing to work herself to death to get it. And this girl, Fuka-Eri, belongs to neither type. Don't ask me why, but style as such simply doesn't interest her. What she does have, though, is the desire to tell a story—a fairly strong desire. I grant her that. Even in this raw form, it was able to draw you in, Tengo, and it made me read the manuscript all the way through. That alone is impressive, you could say. But she has no future as a novelist. None. I hate to disappoint you, but that's my honest opinion."

Tengo had to admit that Komatsu could be right. The man possessed good editorial instincts, if nothing else.

"Still, it wouldn't hurt to give her a chance, would it?"

Tengo asked.

"You mean, throw her in, see if she sinks or swims?"

"In a word."

"I've done too much of that already. I don't want to watch anybody else drown."

"Well, what about me?"

"You at least are willing to work hard," Komatsu said cautiously. "As far as I can tell, you don't cut corners. You're very modest when it comes to the act of writing. And why? Because you *like* to write. I value that in you. It's the single most important quality for somebody who wants to be a writer."

"But not, in itself, enough."

"No, of course, not in itself enough. There also has to be that 'special something,' an indefinable quality, something I can't quite put my finger on. That's the part of fiction I value more highly than anything else. Stuff I understand perfectly doesn't interest me. Obviously. It's

very simple.”

Tengo fell silent for a while. Then he said, “Does Fuka-Eri’s writing have something you don’t understand perfectly?”

“Yes, it does, of course. She has something important. I don’t know what it is exactly, but she has it, that much is clear. It’s obvious to you, and it’s obvious to me. Anybody can see it, like the smoke from a bonfire on a windless afternoon. But whatever she has, Tengo, she probably can’t carry it on her own.”

“Meaning, if we throw her in the water, she’ll drown?”

“Exactly.”

“And that’s why you don’t want to put her on the short list.”

“That is exactly why.” Komatsu contorted his lips and folded his hands on the table. “Which brings us to a point in the conversation where I have to be very careful how I express myself.”

Tengo picked up his coffee cup and stared at the puddle inside. Then he put the cup down again. Komatsu still had not spoken. Tengo asked, “Is this where I find out what you mean by ‘something else’?”

Komatsu narrowed his eyes like a teacher gazing upon his prize pupil. He nodded slowly and said, “It is.”

There was something inscrutable about this man Komatsu. You couldn’t easily tell from his expression or tone of voice what he was thinking or feeling. He appeared to derive a good deal of pleasure from keeping others guessing. Mentally, he was very quick, that was for certain. He was the type of man who had his own sense of logic and reached his own conclusions without regard to the opinions of others. He did not engage in pointless intellectual display, but it was clear that he had read an enormous amount and that his knowledge was both wide-ranging and deep. Nor was it simply a matter of factual knowledge; he had an intuition, an instinct, for

of factual knowledge: he had an intuitive eye both for people and for books. His biases played a large role here, but for Komatsu bias was an important element of truth.

He never said a great deal, and he hated long-winded explanations, but when necessary he could present his views logically and precisely. He could also be quite caustic if he felt like it, aiming a quick and merciless jab at his opponent's weakest point. He had very strong opinions about both people and literature; the works and individuals he could not tolerate far outnumbered those he could. Not surprisingly, the number of people who disliked him was far greater than those who thought well of him—which was exactly what he hoped for. Tengu thought that Komatsu enjoyed the isolation—and even relished being openly hated. Komatsu believed that mental acuity was never born from comfortable circumstances.

At forty-five, Komatsu was sixteen years older than Tengu. A dedicated editor of literary magazines, he had established a certain reputation as one of the top people in the industry, but no one knew a thing about his private life. He met with people constantly in his work, but he never spoke of anything personal. Tengu had no idea where he was born or raised, or even where he lived. They often had long conversations, but such topics never came up. People were puzzled that a difficult man like Komatsu was able to solicit manuscripts from writers—he had no friends to speak of and displayed only contempt for the literary world—but over the years he managed, almost effortlessly, to obtain work by famous authors for the magazine, and more than a few issues owed their contents to his efforts. So even if they didn't like him, people respected him.

Rumor had it that when Komatsu was a student in the prestigious University of Tokyo's Department of Literature in 1960, he had been one of the leaders of the huge leftist demonstrations against the U.S. Japan

huge anti-demonstrations against the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. He was said to have been near fellow student Michiko Kanba when she was killed by riot police, and to have suffered serious injuries himself. No one knew if this was true, but there was something about Komatsu that made the stories seem convincing. He was tall and gangly, with an oversized mouth and an undersized nose. He had long limbs and nicotine-stained fingers, reminiscent of those failed revolutionary intellectuals in nineteenth-century Russian novels. He rarely smiled, but when he did it was with his whole face. Not that it made him look especially happy—he was more like an old sorcerer chuckling to himself over an ominous prophecy he was about to reveal. Clean and decently groomed, he always wore a tweed jacket, white oxford cloth or pale gray polo shirt, no tie, gray pants, suede shoes—a “uniform” meant to show the world he didn’t care about these things. Tengo imagined a half-dozen three-button tweed jackets of a subtly different color, cloth, and pattern that hung, carefully brushed, in Komatsu’s closet. Perhaps Komatsu had to attach number tags to distinguish one jacket from another.

Komatsu’s fine, wiry hair was beginning to show a touch of gray in front. Tangled on the sides, it was long enough to cover his ears, and it always stayed that length, about a week overdue for a haircut. Tengo wondered how such a thing was possible. At times Komatsu’s eyes would take on a sharp glow, like stars glittering in the winter night sky. And if something caused him to clam up, he would maintain his silence like a rock on the far side of the moon. All expression would disappear from his face, and his body seemed to go cold.

Tengo first met Komatsu five years earlier when he was short-listed for the new writers’ prize competition of Komatsu’s magazine. Komatsu called and said he wanted to get together for a chat. They agreed to meet in a café in Shinjuku (the same one in which they were now sitting). Komatsu told Tengo there was no way his work

saung). Komatsu told Tengen there was no way his work would take the prize (and in fact it did not). Komatsu himself, however, had enjoyed the story. "I'm not looking for thanks, but I almost never say this to anyone," he said. (This was in fact true, as Tengen came to learn.) "So I'd like you to let me read your next story before you show it to anyone else." Tengen promised to do that.

Komatsu also wanted to learn about Tengen as a person—his experience growing up, what he was doing now. Tengen explained himself as honestly as he could. He was born in the city of Ichikawa in nearby Chiba Prefecture. His mother died of an illness shortly after he was born, or at least that was what his father told him. He had no siblings. His father never remarried but raised Tengen by himself, collecting NHK television subscription fees door to door to make a living. Now, however, his father had Alzheimer's disease and was living in a nursing home on the southern tip of Chiba's Boso Peninsula. Tengen himself had graduated from Tsukuba University's oddly named "School 1 College of Natural Studies Mathematics Major" and was writing fiction while teaching mathematics at a private cram school in Yoyogi. At the time of his graduation he could have taken a position at a prefectural high school near home, but instead chose the relatively free schedule of the Tokyo cram school. He lived alone in a small apartment in the Koenji District west of downtown Tokyo, which gave him an easy half-hour commute to school.

Tengen did not know for certain whether he wanted to be a professional novelist, nor was he sure he had the talent to write fiction. What he did know was that he could not help spending a large part of every day writing fiction. To him, writing was like breathing.

Komatsu said practically nothing as he listened to Tengen's story. He seemed to like Tengen, though it was not clear why. Tengen was a big man (he had been a key member of his judo team in middle school, high school

... (MIDDLE OF HIS JOURNALS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL, HIGH SCHOOL, and college), and he had the eyes of an early-waking farmer. He wore his hair short, seemed always to have a tan, and had cauliflower ears. He looked neither like a youthful devotee of literature nor like a teacher of mathematics, which was also something that Komatsu seemed to like about him.

Whenever Tengu finished a story, he would take it to Komatsu. Komatsu would read it and offer his comments. Tengu would rewrite it following his advice and bring it to Komatsu again, who would provide new instructions, like a coach raising the bar a little at a time. "Your case might take some time," he said. "But we're in no hurry. Just make up your mind to write every single day. And don't throw anything out. It might come in handy later." Tengu agreed to follow Komatsu's advice.

For his part, Komatsu would occasionally send small writing jobs Tengu's way. Anonymously, Tengu wrote copy for the women's magazine produced by Komatsu's publisher. He handled everything: revising letters to the editor, writing background pieces on movies and books, composing horoscopes. His horoscopes were especially popular because they were often right. Once when he wrote, "Beware an early-morning earthquake," there actually was a big earthquake early one morning. Tengu was grateful for the extra income and for the writing practice this work provided. It made him happy to see his writing in print—in any form—displayed in the bookstores.

Eventually Tengu was hired as a screener for the literary magazine's new writers' prize. It was odd for him to be screening other writers' works when he himself was competing for the prize, but he read everything impartially, not terribly concerned about the delicacy of his situation. If nothing else, the experience of reading mounds of badly written fiction gave him an indelible lesson in exactly what constituted badly written fiction. He read around one hundred works each time, choosing

to read about one hundred works each time, choosing ten that might have some point to them to bring to Komatsu with written comments. Five works would make it to the short list, and from those the four-person committee would select the winner.

Tengo was not the only part-time screener, and Komatsu was only one of several editors engaged in assembling the short list. This was all in the name of fairness, but such efforts were not really necessary. No matter how many works were entered in the competition, there were never more than two or three of any value, and no one could possibly miss those. Three of Tengo's stories had made the short list in the past. Each had been chosen not by Tengo himself, of course, but by two other screeners and then by Komatsu, who manned the editorial desk. None had won the prize, but this had not been a crushing blow to Tengo. For one thing, Komatsu had ingrained in him the idea that he just had to give it time. And Tengo himself was not all that eager to become a novelist right away.

If he arranged his teaching schedule well, Tengo was able to spend four days a week at home. He had taught at the same cram school for seven years now, and he was popular with the students because he knew how to convey the subject succinctly and clearly, and he could answer any question on the spot. Tengo surprised himself with his own eloquence. His explanations were clever, his voice carried well, and he could excite the class with a good joke. He had always thought of himself as a poor speaker, and even now he could be at a loss for words when confronted face-to-face. In a small group, he was strictly a listener. In front of a large class, however, his head would clear, and he could speak at length with ease. His own teaching experience gave him renewed awareness of the inscrutability of human beings.

Tengo was not dissatisfied with his salary. It was by no means high, but the school paid in accordance with ability. The students were asked to do course evaluations

periodically, and compensation hinged on the results. The school was afraid of having its best teachers lured away (and, in fact, Tendo had been headhunted several times). This never happened at ordinary schools. There, salary was set by seniority, teachers' private lives were subject to the supervision of administrators, and ability and popularity counted for nothing. Tendo actually enjoyed teaching at the cram school. Most of the students went there with the explicit purpose of preparing for the college entrance exams, and they attended his lectures enthusiastically. Teachers had only one duty: to teach their classes. This was exactly what Tendo wanted. He never had to deal with student misbehavior or infractions of school rules. All he had to do was show up in the classroom and teach students how to solve mathematical problems. And the manipulation of pure abstractions using numerical tools came naturally to Tendo.

When he was home, Tendo usually wrote from first thing in the morning until the approach of evening. All he needed to satisfy him was his Mont Blanc pen, his blue ink, and standard manuscript sheets, each page lined with four hundred empty squares ready to accept four hundred characters. Once a week his married girlfriend would come to spend the afternoon with him. Sex with a married woman ten years his senior was stress free and fulfilling, because it couldn't lead to anything. As the sun was setting, he would head out for a long walk, and once the sun was down he would read a book while listening to music. He never watched television. Whenever the NHK fee collector came, he would point out that he had no television set, and politely refuse to pay. "I really don't have one. You can come in and look if you want," he would say, but the collector would never come in. They were not allowed to.

"I have something bigger in mind," Komatsu said.



“Something bigger?”

“Much bigger. Why be satisfied with small-scale stuff like the new writers’ prize? As long as we’re aiming, why not go for something big?”

Tengo fell silent. He had no idea what Komatsu was getting at, but he sensed something disturbing.

“The Akutagawa Prize!” Komatsu declared after a moment’s pause.

“The Akutagawa Prize?” Tengo repeated the words slowly, as if he were writing them in huge characters with a stick on wet sand.

“Come on, Tengo, you can’t be *that* out of touch! The Akutagawa Prize! Every writer’s dream! Huge headlines in the paper! TV news!”

“Now you’re losing me. Are we still talking about Fuka-Eri?”

“Of course we are—Fuka-Eri and *Air Chrysalis*. Have we been discussing anything else?”

Tengo bit his lip as he tried to fathom the meaning behind Komatsu’s words. “But you yourself said there’s no way *Air Chrysalis* can take the new writers’ prize. Haven’t we been talking about that all along, how the work will never amount to anything the way it is?”

“Precisely. It’ll never amount to anything the way it is. That is for certain.”

Tengo needed time to think. “Are you saying it needs to be revised?”

“It’s the only way. It’s not that unusual for an author to revise a promising work with the advice of an editor. It happens all the time. Only, in this case, rather than the author, someone else will do the revising.”

“Someone else?” Tengo asked, but he already knew what Komatsu’s answer would be.

“You.”

Tengo searched for an appropriate response but couldn’t find one. He heaved a sigh and said, “You know as well as I do that this work is going to need more than

a little patching here and there. It'll never come together without a fundamental top-to-bottom rewrite."

"Which is why you'll rewrite it from top to bottom. Just use the framework of the story as is. And keep as much of the tone as possible. But change the language—a total remake. You'll be in charge of the actual writing, and I'll be the producer."

"Just like that?" Tengo muttered, as if to himself.

"Look," Komatsu said, picking up a spoon and pointing it at Tengo the way a conductor uses his baton to single out a soloist from the rest of the orchestra. "This Fuka-Eri girl has something special. Anyone can see it reading *Air Chrysalis*. Her imagination is far from ordinary. Unfortunately, though, her writing is hopeless. A total mess. You, on the other hand, know how to write. Your story lines are good. You have taste. You may be built like a lumberjack, but you write with intelligence and sensitivity. And real power. Unlike Fuka-Eri, though, you still haven't grasped exactly what it is you want to write about. Which is why a lot of your stories are missing something at the core. I know you've got something inside you that you need to write about, but you can't get it to come out. It's like a frightened little animal hiding way back in a cave—you know it's in there, but there's no way to catch it until it comes out. Which is why I keep telling you, just give it time."

Tengo shifted awkwardly on the booth's vinyl seat. He said nothing.

"The answer is simple," Komatsu said, still lightly waving his spoon. "We put the two writers together and invent a brand-new one. We add your perfect style to Fuka-Eri's raw story. It's an ideal combination. I know you've got it in you. Why do you think I've been backing you all this time? Just leave the rest to me. With the two of you together, the new writers' prize will be easy, and then we can shoot for the Akutagawa. I haven't been wasting my time in this business all these years. I know

how to pull the right strings.”

Tengo let his lips part as he stared at Komatsu. Komatsu put his spoon back in his saucer. It made an abnormally loud sound.

“Supposing the story wins the Akutagawa Prize, then what?” Tengo asked, recovering from the shock.

“If it takes the Akutagawa, it’ll cause a sensation. Most people don’t know the value of a good novel, but they don’t want to be left out, so they’ll buy it and read it—especially when they hear it was written by a high school girl. If the book sells, it’ll make a lot of money. We’ll split it three ways. I’ll take care of that.”

“Never mind the money” Tengo said, his voice flat. “How about your professional ethics as an editor? If the scheme became public, it’d cause an uproar. You’d lose your job.”

“It wouldn’t come out so easily. I can handle the whole thing very carefully. And even if it did come out, I’d be glad to leave the company. Management doesn’t like me, and they’ve never treated me decently. Finding another job would be no problem for me. Besides, I wouldn’t be doing it for the money. I’d be doing it to screw the literary world. Those bastards all huddle together in their gloomy cave and kiss each other’s asses, and lick each other’s wounds, and trip each other up, all the while spewing this pompous crap about the mission of literature. I want to have a good laugh at their expense. I want to outwit the system and make idiots out of the whole bunch of them. Doesn’t that sound like fun to you?”

It did not sound like all that much fun to Tengo. For one thing, he had never actually seen this “literary world.” And when he realized that a competent individual like Komatsu had such childish motives for crossing such a dangerous bridge, he was momentarily at a loss for words.

“It sounds like a scam to me,” he said at length.

“Coauthorship is not that unusual,” Komatsu said with a frown. “Half the magazines’ serialized *manga* are coauthored. The staff toss around ideas and make up the story, the artist does simple line drawings, his assistants fill in the details and add color. It’s not much different from the way a factory makes alarm clocks. The same sort of thing goes on in the fiction world. Romance novels, for example. With most of those, the publisher hires writers to make up stories following the guidelines they’ve established. Division of labor: that’s the system. Mass production would be impossible any other way. In the self-conscious world of literary fiction, of course, such methods are not openly sanctioned, so as a practical strategy we have to set Fuka-Eri up as our single author. If the deception comes out, it might cause a bit of a scandal, but we wouldn’t be breaking the law. We’d just be riding the current of the times. And besides, we’re not talking about a Balzac or a Murasaki Shikibu here. All we’d be doing is patching the holes in the story some high school girl wrote and making it a better piece of fiction. What’s wrong with that? If the finished work is good and brings pleasure to a lot of readers, then no harm done, don’t you agree?”

Tengo gave some thought to what Komatsu was saying, and he answered with care. “I see two problems here. I’m sure there are more than that, but for now let me concentrate on these two. One is that we don’t know whether the author, Fuka-Eri, would go along with having someone else rewrite her work. If she says no, of course, that’s the end of that. The other problem, assuming she says okay, is whether I could really do a good job of rewriting it. Coauthorship is a very delicate matter; I can’t believe things would go as easily as you are suggesting.”

“I know you can do it, Tengo,” Komatsu said without hesitation, as if he had been anticipating Tengo’s reaction. “I have no doubt whatever. I knew it the first

time I read *Air Chrysalis*. The first thing that popped into my head was ‘Tengo has to rewrite this!’ It’s perfect for you. It’s aching for you to rewrite it. Don’t you see?”

Tengo merely shook his head, saying nothing.

“There’s no rush,” Komatsu said quietly. “This is important. Take two or three days to think about it. Read *Air Chrysalis* again, and give some good, careful thought to what I’m proposing. And—oh yes, let me give you this.”

Komatsu withdrew a brown envelope from his breast pocket and handed it to Tengo. Inside the envelope were two standard-size color photos, pictures of a girl. One showed her from the chest up, the other was a full-length snapshot. They seemed to have been taken at the same time. She was standing in front of a stairway somewhere, a broad stone stairway. Classically beautiful features. Long, straight hair. White blouse. Small and slim. Her lips were trying to smile, but her eyes were resisting. Serious eyes. Eyes in search of something. Tengo stared at the two photos. The more he looked, the more he thought about himself at that age, and the more he sensed a small, dull ache in his chest. It was a special ache, something he had not experienced for a very long time.

“That’s Fuka-Eri,” Komatsu said. “Beautiful girl, don’t you think? Sweet and fresh. Seventeen. Perfect. We won’t tell anyone that her real name is Eriko Fukada. We’ll keep her as ‘Fuka-Eri.’ The name alone should cause a stir if she wins the Akutagawa Prize, don’t you think? She’ll have reporters swarming around her like bats at sunset. The books’ll sell out overnight.”

Tengo wondered how Komatsu had gotten hold of the photos. Entrants were not required to send in photos with their manuscripts. But he decided not to ask, partly because he didn’t want to know the answer, whatever it might be.

“You can keep those,” Komatsu said. “They might come in handy.”

Tengo put them back into the envelope and laid them on the manuscript. Then he said to Komatsu, "I don't know much about how the 'industry' works, but sheer common sense tells me this is a tremendously risky plan. Once you start lying to the public, you have to keep lying. It never ends. It's not easy, either psychologically or practically, to keep tweaking the truth to make it all fit together. If one person who's in on the plan makes one little slip, everybody could be done for. Don't you agree?"

Komatsu pulled out another cigarette and lit it. "You're absolutely right. It *is* risky. There are a few too many uncertainties at this point in time. One slip, and things could get *very* unpleasant for us. I'm perfectly aware of that. But you know, Tengo, taking everything into consideration, my instincts still tell me, 'Go for it!' For the simple reason that you don't get chances like this very often. I've never had one before, and I'm sure I'll never have another one. Comparing this to gambling might not be the best way to look at it, but we've got all the right cards and a mountain of chips. The conditions are perfect. If we let a chance like this slip away, we'll regret it for the rest of our lives."

Tengo stared in silence at Komatsu's utterly sinister smile.

Komatsu continued: "And the most important thing is that we are remaking *Air Chrysalis* into a much better work. It's a story that *should* have been much better written. There's something important in it, something that needs someone to bring it out. I'm sure you think so too, Tengo. Am I wrong? We each contribute our own special talents to the project: we pool our resources for one thing only, and that is to *bring out that important something in the work*. Our motives are pure: we can present them anywhere without shame."

"Well, you can try to rationalize it all you want, you can invent all kinds of noble-sounding pretexts, but in the

end, a scam is a scam.”

“Look, Tengu, you’re losing sight of one crucial fact,” Komatsu said, his mouth opening in a big, wide grin the likes of which Tengu had never seen. “Or should I say you are deliberately choosing not to look at it? And that’s the simple fact that *you want to do this*. You already feel that way—‘risk’ and ‘morality’ be damned. I can see it. You’re itching to rewrite *Air Chrysalis* with your own hands. *You* want to be the one, not Fuka-Eri, who brings out that special something in the work. I want you to go home now and figure out what you really think. Stand in front of a mirror and give yourself a long, hard look. It’s written all over your face.”

Tengu felt the air around him growing thin. He glanced at his surroundings. Was the image coming to him again? But no, there was no sign of it. The thinness of the air had come from something else. He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his brow. Komatsu was always right. Why should that be?

### CHAPTER 3

## Aomame

### SOME CHANGED FACTS

Aomame climbed down the emergency stairway in her stocking feet. The wind whistled past the stairway, which was open to the elements. Snug though her miniskirt was,

it filled like a sail with the occasional strong gust from below, providing enough lift to make her steps unsteady. She kept a tight grip on the cold metal pipe that served as a handrail, lowering herself a step at a time, backward, and stopping now and then to brush aside the stray hair hanging down her forehead and to adjust the position of the shoulder bag slung diagonally across her chest.

She had a sweeping view of National Highway 246 running below. The din of the city enveloped her: car engines, blaring horns, the scream of an automobile burglar alarm, an old war song echoing from a right-wing sound truck, a sledgehammer cracking concrete. Riding on the wind, the noise pressed in on her from all directions—above, below, and 360 degrees around. Listening to the racket (not that she wanted to listen, but she was in no position to be covering her ears), she began to feel almost seasick.

Partway down, the stairs became a horizontal catwalk leading back toward the center of the elevated expressway, then angled straight down again.

Just across the road from the open stairway stood a small, five-story apartment house, a relatively new building covered in brown brick tile. Each apartment had a small balcony facing the emergency stairway, but all the patio doors were shut tight, the blinds or curtains closed. What kind of architect puts balconies on a building that stands nose-to-nose with an elevated expressway? No one would be hanging out their sheets to dry or lingering on the balcony with a gin and tonic to watch the evening rush-hour traffic. Still, on several balconies were stretched the seemingly obligatory nylon clotheslines, and one even had a garden chair and potted rubber plant. The rubber plant was ragged and faded, its leaves disintegrating and marked with brown dry spots. Aomame could not help feeling sorry for the plant. If she were ever reincarnated, let her *not* be reborn as such a



miserable rubber plant!

Judging from the spiderwebs clinging to it, the emergency stairway was hardly ever used. To each web clung a small black spider, patiently waiting for its small prey to come along. Not that the spiders had any awareness of being “patient.” A spider had no special skill other than building its web, and no lifestyle choice other than sitting still. It would stay in one place waiting for its prey until, in the natural course of things, it shriveled up and died. This was all genetically predetermined. The spider had no confusion, no despair, no regrets. No metaphysical doubt, no moral complications. Probably. *Unlike me. I have to move with a purpose, which is why I’m alone now, climbing down these stupid emergency stairs from Metropolitan Expressway Number 3 where it passes through the useless Sangenjaya neighborhood, even if it means ruining a perfectly good pair of stockings, all the while sweeping away these damned spiderwebs and looking at an ugly rubber plant on somebody’s stupid balcony.*

*I move, therefore I am.*

Climbing down the stairway, Aomame thought about Tamaki Otsuka. She had not been intending to think about Tamaki, but once the thoughts began, she couldn’t stop them. Tamaki was her closest friend in high school and a fellow member of the softball team. As teammates, they went to many different places, and did all kinds of things together. They once shared a kind of lesbian experience. The two of them took a summer trip and ended up sleeping together when a small double was the only size bed the hotel could offer. They found themselves touching each other all over. Neither of them was a lesbian, but, spurred on by the special curiosity of two young girls, they experimented boldly. Neither had a boyfriend at the time, and neither had the slightest sexual experience. It was simply one of those things that remain

as an exceptional but interesting episode in life. But as she brought back the images of herself and Tamaki touching each other that night, Aomame felt some small, deep part of herself growing hot even as she made her way down the windswept stairway. Tamaki's oval-shaped nipples, her sparse pubic hair, the lovely curve of her buttocks, the shape of her clitoris: Aomame recalled them all with strange clarity.

As her mind traced these graphic memories, the brass unison of Janáček's *Sinfonietta* rang like festive background music. The palm of her hand was caressing the curve of Tamaki's waist. At first Tamaki just laughed as if she were being tickled, but soon the laughter stopped, and her breathing changed. The music had initially been composed as a fanfare for an athletic meet. The breeze blew gently over the green meadows of Bohemia in time with the music. Aomame knew when Tamaki's nipples suddenly became erect. And then her own did the same. And then the timpani conjured up a complex musical pattern.

Aomame halted her steps and shook her head several times. *I should not be thinking such thoughts at a time like this. I have to concentrate on climbing down the stairs.* But the thoughts would not go away. The images came to her one after another and with great vividness. The summer night, the narrow bed, the faint smell of perspiration. The words they spoke. The feelings that would not take the form of words. Forgotten promises. Unrealized hopes. Frustrated longings. A gust of wind lifted a lock of her hair and whipped it against her cheek. The pain brought a film of tears to her eyes. Successive gusts soon dried the tears away.

*When did that happen, I wonder?* But time became confused in her memory, like a tangled string. The straight-line axis was lost, and forward and back, right and left, jumbled together. One drawer took the place of another. She could not recall things that should have

come back to her easily. It is now April 1984. I was born in ... that's it ... 1954. I can remember that much. These dates were engraved in her mind, but as soon as she recalled them, they lost all meaning. She saw white cards imprinted with dates scattering in the wind, flying in all directions. She ran, trying to pick up as many as she could, but the wind was too strong, the sheer number of cards overwhelming. Away they flew: 1954, 1984, 1645, 1881, 2006, 771, 2041 ... all order lost, all knowledge vanishing, the stairway of intellection crumbling beneath her feet.

Aomame and Tamaki were in bed together. They were seventeen and enjoying their newly granted freedom. This was their first trip together as friends, just the two of them. That fact alone was exciting. They soaked in the hotel's hot spring, split a can of beer from the refrigerator, turned out the lights, and crawled into bed. They were just kidding around at first, poking each other for the fun of it, but at some point Tamaki reached out and grabbed Aomame's nipple through the T-shirt she wore as pajamas. An electric shock ran through Aomame's body. Eventually they stripped off their shirts and panties and were naked in the summer night. *Where did we go on that trip?* She could not recall. It didn't matter. Soon, without either of them being the first to suggest it, they were examining each other's bodies down to the smallest detail. Looking, touching, caressing, kissing, licking, half in jest, half seriously. Tamaki was small and a bit plump with large breasts. Aomame was taller, lean and muscular, with smaller breasts. Tamaki always talked about going on a diet, but Aomame found her attractive just the way she was.

Tamaki's skin was soft and fine. Her nipples swelled in a beautiful oval shape reminiscent of olives. Her pubic hair was fine and sparse, like a delicate willow tree. Aomame's was hard and bristly. They laughed at the difference. They experimented with touching each other in different places and discussed which areas were the

in different places and discussed which areas were the most sensitive. Some areas were the same, others were not. Each held out a finger and touched the other's clitoris. Both girls had experienced masturbation—a lot. But now they saw how different it was to be touched by someone else. The breeze swept across the meadows of Bohemia.

Aomame came to a stop and shook her head again. She released a deep sigh and tightened her grip on the metal pipe handrail. *I have to stop thinking about these things. I have to concentrate on climbing down the stairs. By now, I must be more than halfway down. Still, why is there so much noise here? Why is the wind so strong? They both seem to be reprimanding me, punishing me.*

Setting such immediate sensory impressions aside, Aomame began to worry about what might await her at the bottom of the stairway. What if someone were there, demanding that she identify herself and explain her presence? Could she get by with a simple explanation —“The traffic was backed up on the expressway and I have such urgent business that I climbed down the stairs”? Or would there be complications? She didn't want any complications. Not today.

Fortunately, she found no one at ground level to challenge her. The first thing she did was pull her shoes from her bag and step into them. The stairway came down to a vacant patch beneath the elevated expressway, a storage area for construction materials hemmed in between the inbound and outbound lanes of Route 246 and surrounded by high metal sheeting. A number of steel poles lay on the bare ground, rusting, probably discarded surplus from some construction job. A makeshift plastic roof covered one part of the area where three cloth sacks lay piled. Aomame had no idea what they held, but they had been further protected from

the rain by a vinyl cover. The sacks, too, seemed to be construction surplus, thrown there at the end of the job because they were too much trouble to haul away. Beneath the roof, several crushed corrugated cartons, some plastic drink bottles, and a number of manga magazines lay on the ground. Aside from a few plastic shopping bags that were being whipped around by the wind, there was nothing else down here.

The area had a metal gate, but a large padlock and several wrappings of chain held it in place. The gate towered over her and was topped with barbed wire. There was no way she could climb over it. Even if she managed to do so, her suit would be torn to shreds. She gave it a few tentative shakes, but it wouldn't budge. There was not even enough space for a cat to squeeze through. Damn. What was the point of locking the place so securely? There was nothing here worth stealing. She frowned and cursed and even spit on the ground. After all her trouble to climb down from the elevated expressway, now she was locked in a storage yard! She glanced at her watch. The time was still okay, but she couldn't go on hanging around in this place forever. And doubling back to the expressway now was out of the question.

The heels of both her stockings were ripped. Checking to make sure that there was no one watching her, she slipped out of her high heels, rolled up her skirt, pulled her stockings down, yanked them off her feet, and stepped into her shoes again. The torn stockings she shoved into her bag. This calmed her somewhat. Now she walked the perimeter of the storage area, paying close attention to every detail. It was about the size of an elementary school classroom, so a full circuit of the place took no time at all. Yes, she had already found the only exit, the locked gate. The metal sheeting that enclosed the space was thin, but the pieces were securely bolted together, and the bolts could not be loosened without

tools. Time to give up.

She went over to the roofed area for a closer look at the crushed cartons. They had been arranged as bedding, she realized, with a number of worn blankets rolled up inside. They were not all that old, either. Some street people were probably sleeping here, which explained the bottles and magazines. No doubt about it. Aomame put her mind to work. If they were using this place to spend their nights, it must have some kind of secret entrance. They're good at finding hidden places to ward off the wind and rain, she thought. And they know how to secure secret passageways, like animal trails, for their exclusive use.

Aomame made another round, closely inspecting each metal sheet of the fence and giving it a shake. As she expected, she found one loose spot where a bolt might have slipped out. She tried bending it in different directions. If you changed the angle a little and pulled it inward, a space opened up that was just big enough for a person to squeeze through. The street people probably came in after dark to enjoy sleeping under the roof, but they would have problems if someone caught them in here, so they went out during the daylight hours to find food and collect empty bottles for spare change. Aomame inwardly thanked the nameless nighttime residents. As someone who had to move stealthily, anonymously, behind the scenes in the big city, she felt at one with them.

She crouched down and slipped through the narrow gap, taking great care to avoid catching and tearing her expensive suit on any sharp objects. It was not her favorite suit: it was the only one she owned. She almost never dressed this way, and she never wore heels. Sometimes, however, this particular line of work required her to dress respectably, so she had to avoid ruining the suit.

Fortunately, there was no one outside the fence,

either. She checked her clothing once more, resumed a calm expression on her face, and walked to a corner with a traffic signal. Crossing Route 246, she entered a drugstore and bought a new pair of stockings, which she put on in a back room with the permission of the girl at the register. This improved her mood considerably and obliterated the slight discomfort, like seasickness, that had remained in her stomach. Thanking the clerk, she left the store.

The traffic on Route 246 was heavier than usual, probably because word had spread that an accident had stopped traffic on the parallel urban expressway. Aomame abandoned the idea of taking a cab and decided instead to take the Tokyu Shin-Tamagawa Line from a nearby station. That would be a sure thing. She had had enough of taxis stuck in traffic.

As she headed for Sengenjaya Station, she passed a policeman on the street. He was a tall young officer, walking rapidly, heading somewhere in particular. She tensed up for a moment, but he looked straight ahead, apparently in too much of a hurry even to glance at her. Just before they passed each other, Aomame noticed that there was something unusual about his uniform. The jacket was the normal deep navy blue, but its cut was different: the design was more casual, less tight fitting, and in a softer material, the lapels smaller, even the navy color a touch paler. His pistol, too, was a different model. He wore a large automatic at his waist instead of the revolver normally issued to policemen in Japan. Crimes involving firearms were so rare in this country that there was little likelihood that an officer would be caught in a shootout, which meant an old-fashioned six-shooter was adequate. Revolvers were simply made, cheap, reliable, and easy to maintain. But for some reason this officer was carrying the latest model semiautomatic pistol, the kind that could be loaded with sixteen 9mm bullets. Probably a Glock or a Beretta. But how could

that be? How could police uniforms and pistols have changed without her being aware of it? It was practically unthinkable. She read the newspaper closely each day. Changes like that would have been featured prominently. And besides, she paid careful attention to police uniforms. Until this morning, just a few hours ago, policemen were still wearing the same old stiff uniforms they always had, and still carrying the same old unsophisticated revolvers. She remembered them clearly. It was very strange.

But Aomame was in no frame of mind to think deeply about such matters. She had a job to do.

When the subway reached Shibuya Station, she deposited her coat in a coin locker, then hurried up Dogenzaka toward the hotel wearing only her suit. It was a decent enough hotel, nothing fancy, but well equipped, clean, with reputable guests. It had a restaurant on the street level, as well as a convenience store. Close to the station. A good location.

She walked in and headed straight for the ladies' room. Fortunately, it was empty. The first thing she did was sit down for a good, long pee, eyes closed, listening to the sound like distant surf, and thinking of nothing in particular. Next she stood at one of the sinks and washed her hands well with soap and water. She brushed her hair and blew her nose. She took out her toothbrush and did a cursory brushing without toothpaste. She had no time to floss. It wasn't that important. She wasn't preparing for a date. She faced the mirror and added a touch of lipstick and eyebrow pencil. Removing her suit jacket, she adjusted the position of her underwire bra, smoothed the wrinkles in her white blouse, and sniffed her armpits. No smell. Then she closed her eyes and recited the usual prayer, the words of which meant nothing. The meaning didn't matter. Reciting was the important thing.

After the prayer she opened her eyes and looked at



herself in the mirror. Fine. The picture of the capable businesswoman. Erect posture. Firm mouth. Only the big, bulky shoulder bag seemed out of place. A slim attaché case might have been better, but this bag was more practical. She checked again to make sure she had all the items she needed in the bag. No problem. Everything was where it belonged, easy to find by touch.

Now it was just a matter of carrying out the task as arranged. Head-on. With unwavering conviction and ruthlessness. Aomame undid the top button of her blouse. This would give a glimpse of cleavage when she bent over. If only she had more cleavage to expose!

No one challenged her as she took the elevator to the fourth floor, walked down the corridor, and quickly found Room 426. Taking a clipboard from the bag, she clutched it to her chest and knocked on the door. A light, crisp knock. A brief wait. Another knock, this one a little harder. Grumbling from inside. Door opened a crack. Man's face. Maybe forty. Marine-blue shirt. Gray flannel slacks. Classic look of a businessman working with his tie and jacket off. Red eyes, annoyed. Probably sleep deprived. He seemed surprised to see Aomame in her business suit, probably expecting her to be a maid, here to replenish the minibar.

"I'm terribly sorry to disturb you, sir. My name is Ito, and I'm a member of the hotel management staff. There has been a problem with the air conditioner and I need to do an inspection. May I come in? It won't take more than five minutes," Aomame announced briskly, with a sweet smile.

The man squinted at her in obvious displeasure. "I'm working on something important, a rush job. I'll be leaving the room in another hour. Can I get you to come back then? There's nothing wrong with the air conditioner in this room."

I'm terribly sorry, sir. It's an emergency involving a short circuit. We need to take care of it as soon as possible, for safety's sake. We're going from room to room. It won't even take five minutes ..."

"Ah, what the hell," the man said, with a click of his tongue. "I made a point of taking a room so I could work undisturbed."

He pointed to the papers on the desk—a pile of detailed charts and graphs he had printed out, probably materials he was preparing for a late meeting. He had a computer and a calculator, and scratch paper with long lines of figures.

Aomame knew that he worked for a corporation connected with oil. He was a specialist on capital investment in a number of Middle Eastern countries. According to the information she had been given, he was one of the more capable men in the field. She could see it in the way he carried himself. He came from a good family, earned a sizable income, and drove a new Jaguar. After a pampered childhood, he had gone to study abroad, spoke good English and French, and exuded self-confidence. He was the type who could not bear to be told what to do, or to be criticized, especially if the criticism came from a woman. He had no difficulty bossing others around, though, and cracking a few of his wife's ribs with a golf club was no problem at all. As far as he was concerned, the world revolved around him, and without him the earth didn't move at all. He could become furious—violently angry—if anyone interfered with what he was doing or contradicted him in any way.

"Sorry to trouble you, sir," Aomame said, flashing him her best business smile. As if it were a fait accompli, she squeezed halfway into the room, pressing her back against the door, readied her clipboard, and started writing something on it with a ballpoint pen. "That was, uh, Mr. Miyama, I believe ...?" she asked. Having seen his photo any number of times, she knew his face well, but it wouldn't hurt to make sure she had the right

but it wouldn't hurt to make sure she had the right person. There was no way to correct a mistake.

"Yes, of course. Miyama," he said curtly. He followed this with a resigned sigh that seemed to say, "All right. Do as you damn please." He took his seat at the desk and, with a ballpoint pen in one hand, picked up whatever document he had been reading. His suit coat and a striped tie lay on the fully made double bed where he had thrown them. They were both obviously very expensive. Aomame walked straight for the closet, her bag hanging from her shoulder. She had been told that the air conditioner switch panel was in there. Inside she found a trench coat of soft material and a dark gray cashmere scarf. The only luggage was a leather briefcase. No change of clothes, no bag for toiletries. He was probably not planning to stay the night. On the desk stood a coffeepot that had obviously been delivered by room service. She pretended to inspect the switch panel for thirty seconds and then called out to Miyama.

"Thank you, Mr. Miyama, for your cooperation. I can't find any problem with the equipment in this room."

"Which is what I was trying to tell you from the start," he grumbled.

"Uh ... Mr. Miyama ...?" she ventured. "Excuse me, but I think you have something stuck to the back of your neck."

"The back of my neck?" he said. He rubbed the area and then stared at the palm of his hand. "I don't think so."

"Please just let me have a look," she said, drawing closer. "Do you mind?"

"Sure, go ahead," he said, looking puzzled. "What is it?"

"A spot of paint, I think. Bright green."

"Paint?"

"I'm not really sure. Judging from the color, it has to be paint. Is it all right if I touch you back there? It may come right off."

"Well, okay," Miyama said, ducking his head forward, exposing the back of his neck to Aomame. It was bare, thanks to what looked like a recent haircut. Aomame took a deep breath and held it, concentrating her attention on her fingers' nimble search for the right spot. She pressed a fingertip there as if to mark the place, then closed her eyes, confirming that her touch was not mistaken. *Yes, this is it. I'd like to take more time if possible to make doubly certain, but it's too late for that now. I'll just have to do my best with the situation I've been given.*

"Sorry, sir, but do you mind holding that position a bit longer? I'll take a penlight from my bag. The lighting in here is not very good."

"Why would I have *paint* back there, of all things?"

"I have no idea, sir. I'll check it right away."

Keeping her finger pressed against the spot on the man's neck, Aomame drew a hard plastic case from her bag, opened it, and took out an object wrapped in thin cloth. With a few deft moves she unfolded the cloth, revealing something like a small ice pick about four inches in length with a compact wooden handle. It *looked* like an ice pick, but it was not meant for cracking ice. Aomame had designed and made it herself. The tip was as sharp and pointed as a needle, and it was protected from breakage by a small piece of cork—cork that had been specially processed to make it as soft as cotton. She carefully plucked the cork from the point and slipped it into her pocket. She then held the exposed point against that special spot on Miyama's neck. *Calm down now, this is it, Aomame told herself. I can't be off by even one-hundredth of an inch. One slip and all my efforts will be wasted. Concentration is the key.*

"How much longer is this going to take?" Miyama protested.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'll be through in a moment."

*Don't worry, she said to him silently, it'll all be over before you know it. Wait just a second or two. Then you won't have to think about a thing. You won't have to think about the oil refining system or crude oil market trends or quarterly reports to the investors or Bahrain flight reservations or bribes for officials or presents for your mistress. What a strain it must have been for you to keep these things straight in your head all this time! So please, just wait a minute. I'm hard at work here, giving it all the concentration I can muster. Don't distract me. That's all I ask.*

Once she had settled on the location and set her mind to the task, Aomame raised her right palm in the air, held her breath, and, after a brief pause, brought it straight down—not too forcefully—against the wooden handle. If she applied too much force, the needle might break under the skin, and leaving the needle tip behind was out of the question. The important thing was to bring the palm down lightly, almost tenderly, at exactly the right angle with exactly the right amount of force, without resisting gravity, straight down, as if the fine point of the needle were being sucked into the spot with the utmost naturalness—deeply, smoothly, and with fatal results. The angle and force—or, rather, the restraint of force—were crucial. As long as she was careful about those details, it was as simple as driving a needle into a block of tofu. The needle pierced the skin, thrust into the special spot at the base of the brain, and stopped the heart as naturally as blowing out a candle. Everything ended in a split second, almost too easily. Only Aomame could do this. No one else could find that subtle point by touch. Her fingertips possessed the special intuition that made it possible.

She heard him draw a sharp breath, and then every muscle in his body went stiff. Instantly, she withdrew the needle and just as quickly took out the small gauze pad she had ready in her pocket, pressing it against the

she had ready in her pocket, pressing a finger to the wound to prevent the flow of blood. Because the needle was so fine and had remained in his skin for no more than a few seconds, only a minuscule amount of blood could possibly escape through the opening, but she had to take every precaution. She must not leave even the slightest trace of blood. One drop could ruin everything. Caution was Aomame's specialty.

The strength began to drain from Miyama's body, which had momentarily stiffened, like air going out of a basketball. Keeping her finger on the spot on his neck, Aomame let him slump forward onto the desk. His face lay sideways, pillowed on his documents. His eyes were wide open in apparent surprise, as if his last act had been to witness something utterly amazing. They showed neither fear nor pain, only pure surprise. Something out of the ordinary was happening to him, but he could not comprehend what it was—a pain, an itch, a pleasure, or a divine revelation? There were many different ways of dying in the world, perhaps none of them as easy as this.

*This was an easier death than you deserved, Aomame thought with a scowl. It was just too simple. I probably should have broken a few ribs for you with a five iron and given you plenty of pain before putting you out of your misery. That would have been the right kind of death for a rat like you. It's what you did to your wife. Unfortunately, however, the choice was not mine. My mission was to send this man to the other world as swiftly and surely—and discreetly—as possible. Now, I have accomplished that mission. He was alive until a moment ago, and now he's dead. He crossed the threshold separating life from death without being aware of it himself.*

Aomame held the gauze in place for a full five minutes, patiently, but without pressing hard enough for her finger to leave an indentation. She kept her eyes glued on the second hand of her watch. It was a very long five minutes. If someone had walked in then and seen her

pressing her finger against the man's neck while holding the slender murder weapon in the other hand, it would have been all over. She could never have talked her way out of it. A bellhop could bring a pot of coffee. There could be a knock on the door at any moment. But this was an indispensable five minutes. To calm herself, Aomame took several slow deep breaths. *I can't get flustered now. I can't lose my composure. I have to stay the same calm, cool Aomame as always.*

She could hear her heart beating. And in her head, in time with the beat, resounded the opening fanfare of Janáček's *Sinfonietta*. Soft, silent breezes played across the green meadows of Bohemia. She was aware that she had become split in two. Half of her continued to press the dead man's neck with utter coolness. The other half was filled with fear. She wanted to drop everything and get out of this room *now. I'm here, but I'm not here. I'm in two places at once. It goes against Einstein's theorem, but what the hell. Call it the Zen of the killer.*

The five minutes were finally up. But just to make sure, Aomame gave it one more minute. *I can wait another minute. The greater the rush, the more care one should take with the job.* She endured the extra minute, which seemed as if it would never end. Then she slowly pulled her finger away and examined the wound with her penlight. A mosquito's stinger left a larger hole than this.

Stabbing the special point at the base of the brain with an exceptionally fine needle causes a death that is almost indistinguishable from a natural sudden death. It would look like a heart attack to most ordinary doctors. It hit him without warning while he was working at his desk, and he breathed his last. Overwork and stress. No sign of unnatural causes. No need for an autopsy.

This man was a high-powered operator, but also prone to overwork. He earned a high salary, but he couldn't use it now that he was dead. He wore Armani

suits and drove a Jaguar, but finally he was just another ant, working and working until he died without meaning. The very fact that he existed in this world would eventually be forgotten. "Such a shame, he was so young," people might say. Or they might not.

Aomame took the cork from her pocket and placed it on the needle. Wrapping the delicate instrument in the thin cloth again, she returned it to the hard case, which she placed in the bottom of the shoulder bag. She then took a hand towel from the bathroom and wiped any fingerprints she might have left in the room. These would all be on the air conditioner panel and the doorknob. She had been careful not to touch anything else. She returned the towel to the bathroom. Placing the man's cup and coffee pot on the room service tray, she set them in the corridor. This way the bellhop would not have to knock when he came to retrieve them, and the discovery of the body would be delayed that much more. If all went well, the maid would find the body after checkout time tomorrow.

When he failed to show up at tonight's meeting, people might ring the room, but there would be no answer. They might think it odd enough to have the manager open the room, but then again they might not. Things would simply take their course.

Aomame stood before the bathroom mirror to make sure nothing about her clothing was in disarray. She closed the top button of her blouse. She had not had to flash cleavage. The bastard had hardly looked at her. What the hell did other people mean to him? She tried out a medium frown. Then she straightened her hair, massaged her facial muscles with her fingertips to soften them, and flashed the mirror a sweet smile, revealing her recently cleaned white teeth. *All right, then, here I go, out of the dead man's room and back to the real*



*world. Time to adjust the atmospheric pressure. I'm not a cool killer anymore, just a smiling, capable businesswoman in a sharp suit.*

She opened the door a crack, checked to see that there was no one in the corridor, and slipped out. She took the stairs rather than the elevator. No one paid her any mind as she passed through the lobby. Posture erect, she stared straight ahead and walked quickly—though not quickly enough to attract attention. She was a pro, virtually perfect. If only her breasts were a little bigger, she thought with a twinge, she might have been truly perfect. A partial frown. *But hell, you've gotta work with what you've got.*

#### CHAPTER 4

### Tengo

## IF THAT IS WHAT YOU WANT TO DO

The phone woke Tengo. The luminous hands of his clock pointed to a little after one a.m. The room was dark, of course. Tengo knew the call was from Komatsu. No one but Komatsu would call him at one in the morning—and keep the phone ringing until he picked it up, however long it took. Komatsu had no sense of time. He would place a call the moment a thought struck him, never considering the hour. It could be the middle of the night or the crack of dawn. The other person could be

enjoying his wedding night or lying on his deathbed. The prosaic thought never seemed to enter Komatsu's egg-shaped head that a call from him might be disturbing.

Which is not to say that he did this with everyone. Even Komatsu worked for an organization and collected a salary. He couldn't possibly go around behaving toward everyone with a total disregard for common sense. Only with Tengu could he get away with it. Tengu was, for Komatsu, little more than an extension of Komatsu himself, another arm or leg. If Komatsu was up, Tengu must be up. Tengu normally went to bed at ten o'clock and woke at six, maintaining a generally regular lifestyle. He was a deep sleeper. Once something woke him, though, it was hard for him to get to sleep again. He was high-strung to that extent. He had tried to explain this to Komatsu any number of times, and pleaded with him not to call in the middle of the night, like a farmer begging God not to send swarms of locusts into his fields before harvest time.

"Got it," Komatsu declared. "No more nighttime calls." But his promise had not sunk deep roots in his brain. One rainfall was all it took to wash them out.

Tengu crawled out of bed and, bumping into things, managed to find his way to the phone in the kitchen. All the while, the phone kept up its merciless ringing.

"I talked to Fuka-Eri," Komatsu said. He never bothered with the standard greetings, no "Were you sleeping?" or "Sorry to call so late." Pretty impressive. Tengu couldn't help admiring him.

Tengu frowned in the dark, saying nothing. When roused at night, it took his brain a while to start working.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes, I did."

"It was just a phone call. But I did talk to her. Or *at* her. She just listened. You couldn't exactly call it a conversation. She hardly talks. And she's got an odd way of speaking. You'll see what I mean. Anyhow, I

gave her a general outline of my plan, like, what did she think of the idea of going after the new writers' prize by having somebody rewrite *Air Chrysalis* to get it into better shape? I couldn't give her much more than a rough idea on the phone and ask her if she had any interest, assuming we'd meet and talk over the details. I kept it sort of vague. If I got *too* direct about stuff like this, I could put myself in an awkward position."

"And so?"

"No answer."

"No answer?"

Komatsu paused for effect. He put a cigarette between his lips and lit it with a match. Hearing the sounds over the phone, Tengu could imagine the scene vividly. Komatsu never used a lighter.

"Fuka-Eri says she wants to meet you first," Komatsu said, exhaling. "She didn't say whether or not she was interested in the plan, or whether or not she liked the idea. I guess the main thing is to start by meeting you and talking about it face-to-face. She'll give me her answer after that, she says. The responsibility is all yours, don't you think?"

"And so?"

"Are you free tomorrow evening?"

His classes started in the morning and ended at four. Fortunately (or unfortunately) he had nothing after that. "I'm free," he said.

"Good. I want you to go to the Nakamura Café in Shinjuku at six o'clock. I'll reserve a table for you in the back where it's quiet. It'll be in my name and on the company's tab, so eat and drink as much as you like. The two of you can have a nice, long talk."

"Without you?"

"That's the way Fuka-Eri wants it. She says there's no point in meeting me yet."

Tengu kept silent.

"So that's how it is," Komatsu said cheerily. "Give it

your best shot, Tengen. You're a big lug, but you make a good impression on people. And besides, you teach at a cram school. You're used to talking to these precocious high school girls. You're the right guy for the job, not me. Flash her a smile, win her over, get her to trust you. I'll be looking forward to the good news."

"Now, wait just a minute. This was all *your* idea. I still haven't even told you if I'll do it. Like I said the other day, this is a tremendously risky plan, and I don't see it working all that well. It could turn into a real scandal. How am I supposed to convince this girl I've never met to go along with it when I myself haven't decided to take it on?"

Komatsu remained silent at his end. Then, after a moment's pause, he said, "Now listen, Tengen. We've already pulled out of the station. You can't stop the train and get off now. I'm totally committed. And you're more than half committed, I'm sure. We share the same fate."

Tengen shook his head. *Share the same fate? When did this melodrama get started?* "Just the other day you told me to take my time and think it over, didn't you?"

"It's been five days since then. You've had plenty of time to think it over. What's your decision?" Komatsu demanded.

Tengen was at a loss for words. "I don't have a decision," he said honestly.

"So then, why don't you try meeting this Fuka-Eri girl and talking it over? You can make up your mind after that."

Tengen pressed his fingertips hard against his temples. His brain was still not working properly. "All right. I'll talk to her. Six o'clock tomorrow at the Shinjuku Nakamura-ya. I'll give her *my* explanation of the situation. But I'm not promising any more than that. I can *explain* the plan, but I can't *convince* her of anything."

"That's all I ask, of course."

“So anyway, how much does Fuka-Eri know about me?”

“I filled her in on the general stuff. You’re twenty-nine or thirty, a bachelor, you teach math at a Yoyogi cram school. You’re a big guy, but not a bad guy. You don’t eat young girls. You live a simple lifestyle, you’ve got gentle eyes. And I like your writing a lot. That’s about it.”

Tengo sighed. When he tried to think, reality hovered nearby, then retreated into the distance.

“Do you mind if I go back to bed? It’s almost one thirty, and I want at least a little sleep before the sun comes up. I’ve got three classes tomorrow starting in the morning.”

“Fine. Good night,” Komatsu said. “Sweet dreams.” And he hung up.

Tengo stared at the receiver in his hand for a while, then set it down. He wanted to get to sleep right away if possible, and to have good dreams if possible, but he knew it wouldn’t be easy after having been dragged out of bed and forced to participate in an unpleasant conversation. He could try drinking himself to sleep, but he wasn’t in the mood for alcohol. He ended up drinking a glass of water, getting back in bed, turning on the light, and beginning to read a book. He hoped it would make him sleepy, but he didn’t actually fall asleep until almost dawn. Tengo took the elevated train to Shinjuku after his third class ended. He bought a few books at the Kinokuniya bookstore, and then headed for the Nakamura Café. He gave Komatsu’s name at the door and was shown to a quiet table in the back. Fuka-Eri was not there yet. Tengo told the waiter he would wait for the other person to come. Would he want something to drink while he waited? He said that he would not. The waiter left a menu and a glass of water on the table. Tengo opened one of his new books and started reading. It was a book on occultism and it detailed the function of curses in Japanese society over

the centuries. Curses played a major role in ancient communities. They had made up for the gaps and inconsistencies in the social system. It seemed like an enjoyable time to be alive.

Fuka-Eri had still not come at six fifteen. Unconcerned, Tengu went on reading. It didn't surprise him that she was late. This whole business was so crazy, he couldn't complain to anybody if it took another crazy turn. It would not be strange if she changed her mind and decided not to show up at all. In fact, he would prefer it that way—it would be simpler. He could just report to Komatsu that he waited an hour and she never showed. What would happen after that was no concern of his. He would just eat dinner by himself and go home, and that would satisfy his obligation to Komatsu.

Fuka-Eri arrived at 6:22. The waiter showed her to the table and she sat down across from Tengu. Resting her small hands on the table, not even removing her coat, she stared straight at him. No "Sorry I'm late," or "I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long." Not even a "Hi" or a "Nice to meet you." All she did was look directly at Tengu, her lips forming a tight, straight line. She could have been observing a new landscape from afar. Tengu was impressed.

Fuka-Eri was a small girl, small all over, and her face was more beautiful than in the pictures. Her most attractive facial feature was her deep, striking eyes. Under the gaze of two glistening, pitch-black pupils, Tengu felt uncomfortable. She hardly blinked and seemed almost not to be breathing. Her hair was absolutely straight, as if someone had drawn each individual strand with a ruler, and the shape of her eyebrows matched the hair perfectly. As with many beautiful teenage girls, her expression lacked any trace of everyday life. It also was strangely unbalanced—perhaps because there was a slight difference in the depth of the left and right eyes—causing discomfort in the recipient of

her gaze. You couldn't tell what she was thinking. In that sense, she was not the kind of beautiful girl who becomes a model or a pop star. Rather, she had something about her that aroused people and drew them toward her.

Tengo closed his book and laid it to one side. He sat up straight and took a drink of water. Komatsu had been right. If a girl like this took a literary prize, the media would be all over her. It would be a sensation. And then what?

The waiter came and placed a menu and a glass of water in front of her. Still she did not move. Instead of picking up the menu, she went on staring at Tengo. He felt he had no choice but to say something. "Hello." In her presence, he felt bigger than ever.

Fuka-Eri did not return his greeting but continued to stare at him. "I know you," she murmured at last.

"You know me?" Tengo said.

"You teach math."

He nodded. "I do."

"I heard you twice."

"My lectures?"

"Yes."

Her style of speaking had some distinguishing characteristics: sentences shorn of embellishment, a chronic shortage of inflection, a limited vocabulary (or at least what seemed like a limited vocabulary). Komatsu was right: it was odd.

"You mean you're a student at my school?" Tengo asked.

Fuka-Eri shook her head. "Just went for lectures."

"You're not supposed to be able to get in without a student ID."

Fuka-Eri gave a little shrug, as if to say, "Grown-ups shouldn't say such dumb things."

"How were the lectures?" Tengo asked, his second meaningless question.

Fuka-Eri took a drink of water without averting her

gaze. She did not answer the question. Tengo guessed he couldn't have made too bad an impression if she came twice. She would have quit after the first one if it hadn't aroused her interest.

"You're in your third year of high school, aren't you?" Tengo asked.

"More or less."

"Studying for college entrance exams?"

She shook her head.

Tengo could not decide whether this meant "I don't want to talk about my college entrance exams" or "I wouldn't be caught dead taking college entrance exams." He recalled Komatsu's remark on how little Fuka-Eri had to say.

The waiter came for their orders. Fuka-Eri still had her coat on. She ordered a salad and bread. "That's all," she said, returning the menu to the waiter. Then, as if it suddenly occurred to her, she added, "And a glass of white wine."

The young waiter seemed about to ask her age, but she gave him a stare that made him turn red, and he swallowed his words. *Impressive*, Tengo thought again. He ordered seafood linguine and decided to join Fuka-Eri in a glass of white wine.

"You're a teacher and a writer," Fuka-Eri said. She seemed to be asking Tengo a question. Apparently, asking questions without question marks was another characteristic of her speech.

"For now," Tengo said.

"You don't look like either."

"Maybe not," he said. He thought of smiling but couldn't quite manage it. "I'm certified as an instructor and I do teach courses at a cram school, but I'm not exactly a teacher. I write fiction, but I've never been published, so I'm not a writer yet, either."

"You're nothing."

Tengo nodded. "Exactly. For the moment, I'm



nothing.

“You like math.”

Tengo mentally added a question mark to her comment and answered this new question: “I do like math. I’ve always liked it, and I still like it.”

“What about it.”

“What do I like about math? Hmm. When I’ve got figures in front of me, it relaxes me. Kind of like, everything fits where it belongs.”

“The calculus part was good.”

“You mean in my lecture?”

Fuka-Eri nodded.

“Do you like math?”

She gave her head a quick shake. She did not like math.

“But the part about calculus was good?” he asked.

Fuka-Eri gave another little shrug. “You talked about it like you cared.”

“Oh, really?” Tengo said. No one had ever told him this before.

“Like you were talking about somebody important to you,” she said.

“I can maybe get even more passionate when I lecture on sequences,” Tengo said. “Sequences were a personal favorite of mine in high school math.”

“You like sequences,” Fuka-Eri asked, without a question mark.

“To me, they’re like Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*. I never get tired of them. There’s always something new to discover.”

“I know the *Well-Tempered Clavier*.”

“You like Bach?”

Fuka-Eri nodded. “The Professor is always listening to it.”

“The Professor? One of your teachers?”

Fuka-Eri did not answer. She looked at Tengo with an expression that seemed to say, “It’s too soon to talk about that.”

She took her coat off as if it had only now occurred to her to do so. She emerged from it like an insect sloughing off its skin. Without bothering to fold it, she set it on the chair next to hers. She wore a thin crew-neck sweater of pale green and white jeans, with no jewelry or makeup, but still she stood out. She had a slender build, in proportion to which her full breasts could not help but attract attention. They were beautifully shaped as well. Tengo had to caution himself not to look down there, but he couldn't help it. His eyes moved to her chest as if toward the center of a great whirlpool.

The two glasses of white wine arrived. Fuka-Eri took a sip of hers, and then, after thoughtfully studying the glass, she set it on the table. Tengo took a perfunctory sip. Now it was time to talk about important matters.

Fuka-Eri brought her hand to her straight black hair and combed her fingers through it for a while. It was a lovely gesture, and her fingers were lovely, each seemingly moving according to its own will and purpose as if in tune with something occult.

"What do I like about math?" Tengo asked himself aloud again in order to divert his attention from her fingers and her chest. "Math is like water. It has a lot of difficult theories, of course, but its basic logic is very simple. Just as water flows from high to low over the shortest possible distance, figures can only flow in one direction. You just have to keep your eye on them for the route to reveal itself. That's all it takes. You don't have to do a thing. Just concentrate your attention and keep your eyes open, and the figures make everything clear to you. In this whole, wide world, the only thing that treats me so kindly is math."

Fuka-Eri thought about this for a while. "Why do you write fiction," she asked in her expressionless way.

Tengo converted her question into longer sentences: "In other words, if I like math so much, why do I go to all the trouble of writing fiction? Why not just keep doing

all the trouble of writing fiction: why not just keep doing math? Is that it?"

She nodded.

"Hmm. Real life is different from math. Things in life don't necessarily flow over the shortest possible route. For me, math is—how should I put it?—math is all too natural. It's like beautiful scenery. It's *just there*. There's no need to exchange it with anything else. That's why, when I'm doing math, I sometimes feel I'm turning transparent. And that can be scary."

Fuka-Eri kept looking straight into Tengo's eyes as if she were looking into an empty house with her face pressed up against the glass.

Tengo said, "When I'm writing a story, I use words to transform the surrounding scene into something more natural for me. In other words, I reconstruct it. That way, I can confirm without a doubt that this person known as 'me' exists in the world. This is a totally different process from steeping myself in the world of math."

"You confirm that you exist," Fuka-Eri said.

"I can't say I've been one hundred percent successful at it," Tengo said.

Fuka-Eri did not look convinced by Tengo's explanation, but she said nothing more. She merely brought the glass of wine to her mouth and took soundless little sips as though drinking through a straw.

"If you ask me," Tengo said, "you're in effect doing the same thing. You transform the scenes you see into your own words and reconstruct them. And you confirm your own existence."

Fuka-Eri's hand that held her wineglass stopped moving. She thought about Tengo's remark for a while, but again she offered no opinion.

"You gave shape to that process. In the form of the work you wrote," Tengo added. "If the work succeeds in gaining many people's approval and if they identify with it, then it becomes a literary work with objective value."

Fuka-Eri gave her head a decisive shake. "I'm not interested in form."

"You're not interested in form," Tengo said.

"Form has no *meaning*."

"So then, why did you write the story and submit it for the new writers' prize?"

She put down her wineglass. "I didn't," she said.

To calm himself, Tengo picked up his glass and took a drink of water. "You're saying you didn't submit it?"

Fuka-Eri nodded. "I didn't send it in."

"Well, who did?"

She gave a little shrug, then kept silent for a good fifteen seconds. Finally, she said, "It doesn't matter."

"It doesn't matter," Tengo repeated, emitting a long, slow breath from his pursed lips. *Oh, great. Things really are not going to go smoothly. I knew it.*

Several times, Tengo had formed personal relationships with his female cram school students, though always after they had left the school and entered universities, and it was always the girls who took the initiative. They would call and say they wanted to see him. The two of them would meet and go somewhere together. He had no idea what attracted them to him, but ultimately he was a bachelor, and they were no longer his students. He had no good reason to refuse when asked for a date.

Twice the dates had led to sex, but the relationships had eventually faded on their own. Tengo could not quite relax when he was with energetic young college girls. It was like playing with a kitten, fresh and fun at first, but tiring in the end. The girls, too, seemed disappointed to discover that in person, Tengo was not the same as the passionate young math lecturer they encountered in class. He could understand how they felt.

Tengo was able to relax when he was with older women. Not having to take the lead in everything seemed

to lift a weight from his shoulders. And many older women liked him. Which is why, after having formed a relationship with a married woman ten years his senior a year ago, he had stopped dating any young girls. By meeting his older girlfriend in his apartment once a week, any desire (or need) he might have for a flesh-and-blood woman was pretty well satisfied. The rest of the week he spent shut up in his room alone, writing, reading, and listening to music; occasionally he would go for a swim in the neighborhood pool. Aside from a little chatting with his colleagues at the cram school, he hardly spoke with anyone. He was not especially dissatisfied with this life. Far from it: for him, it was close to ideal.

But this seventeen-year-old girl, Fuka-Eri, was different. The mere sight of her sent a violent shudder through him. It was the same feeling her photograph had given him when he first saw it, but in the living girl's presence it was far stronger. This was not the pangs of love or sexual desire. A certain *something*, he felt, had managed to work its way in through a tiny opening and was trying to fill a blank space inside him. The void was not one that Fuka-Eri had made. It had always been there inside Tengo. She had merely managed to shine a special light on it.

"You're not interested in writing fiction, and you didn't enter the new writers' competition," Tengo said as if confirming what she had told him.

With her eyes locked on his, Fuka-Eri nodded in agreement. Then she gave a little shrug, as if shielding herself from a cold autumn blast.

"You don't want to be a writer." Tengo was shocked to hear himself asking a question without a question mark. The style was obviously contagious.

"No, I don't," Fuka-Eri said.

At that point their meal arrived—a large bowl of salad

and a roll for Fuka-Eri, and seafood linguine for Tengo. Fuka-Eri used her fork to turn over several lettuce leaves, inspecting them as if they were imprinted with newspaper headlines.

“Well, *somebody* sent your *Air Chrysalis* to the publisher for the new writers’ competition. I found it when I was screening manuscripts.”

“*Air Chrysalis*,” Fuka-Eri said, narrowing her eyes.

“That’s the title of the novella you wrote,” Tengo said.

Fuka-Eri kept her eyes narrowed, saying nothing.

“That’s not the title you gave it?” Tengo asked with an uneasy twinge.

Fuka-Eri gave her head a tiny shake.

He began to feel confused again, but he decided not to pursue the question of the title. The important thing was to make some progress with the discussion at hand.

“Never mind, then. Anyway, it’s not a bad title. It has real atmosphere, and it’ll attract attention, make people wonder what it could possibly be about. Whoever thought of it, I have no problem with it as a title. I’m not sure about the distinction between ‘chrysalis’ and ‘cocoon,’ but that’s no big deal. What I’m trying to tell you is that the work really *got* to me, which is why I brought it to Mr. Komatsu. He liked it a lot, too, but he felt that the writing needed work if it was going to be a serious contender for the new writers’ prize. The style doesn’t quite measure up to the strength of the story, so what he wants to do is have it rewritten, not by you but by me. I haven’t decided whether I want to do it or not, and I haven’t given him my answer. I’m not sure it’s the right thing to do.”

Tengo broke off at that point to see Fuka-Eri’s reaction. There was no reaction.

“What I’d like to hear from you now is what you think of the idea of me rewriting *Air Chrysalis* instead of you. Even if I decided to do it, it couldn’t happen without your agreement and cooperation.”

Using her fingers, Fuka-Eri picked a cherry tomato out of her salad and ate it. Tengo stabbed a mussel with his fork and ate that.

"You can do it," Fuka-Eri said simply. She picked up another tomato. "Fix it any way you like."

"Don't you think you should take a little more time to think it over? This is a pretty big decision."

Fuka-Eri shook her head. No need.

"Now, supposing I rewrote your novella," Tengo continued, "I would be careful not to change the story but just strengthen the style. This would probably involve some major changes. But finally, you are the author. It would remain a work by the seventeen-year-old girl named Fuka-Eri. That would not change. If it won the prize, you would get it. Just you. If it were published as a book, you would be the only author listed on the title page. We would be a team—the three of us, you, me, and Mr. Komatsu, the editor. But the only name on the book would be yours. He and I would stay in the background and not say a word, kind of like prop men in a play. Do you understand what I am telling you?"

Fuka-Eri brought a piece of celery to her mouth with her fork. "I understand," she said with a nod.

"*Air Chrysalis* belongs entirely to you. It came out of you. I could never make it mine. I would be nothing but your technical helper, and you would have to keep that fact a complete secret. We'd be engaged in a conspiracy, in other words, to lie to the whole world. Any way you look at it, this is not an easy thing to do, to keep a secret locked up in your heart."

"Whatever you say," Fuka-Eri said.

Tengo pushed his mussel shells to the side of his plate and started to take a forkful of linguine but then reconsidered and stopped. Fuka-Eri picked up a piece of cucumber and bit it carefully, as if tasting something she had never seen before.

Fork in hand, Tengo said, "Let me ask you one more

time. Are you sure you have no objection to my rewriting your story?"

"Do what you want," Fuka-Eri said, when she had finished the cucumber.

"Any way I rewrite it is okay with you?"

"Okay."

"Why is that?" he asked. "You don't know a thing about me."

Fuka-Eri gave a little shrug, saying nothing.

The two continued their meal wordlessly. Fuka-Eri gave her full concentration to her salad. Now and then she would butter a piece of bread, eat it, and reach for her wine. Tengo mechanically transported his linguine to his mouth and filled his mind with many possibilities.

Setting his fork down, he said, "You know, when Mr. Komatsu suggested this idea to me, I thought it was crazy, that there was no way it could work. I was planning to turn him down. But after I got home and thought about it for a while, I started to feel more and more that I wanted to give it a try. Ethical questions aside, I began to feel that I wanted to put my own stamp on the novella that you had written. It was—how to put this?—a totally natural, spontaneous desire."

*Or rather than a desire, hunger might be a better way to put it,* Tengo added mentally. Just as Komatsu had predicted, the hunger was becoming increasingly difficult to suppress.

Fuka-Eri said nothing, but from somewhere deep inside her neutral, beautiful eyes, she looked hard at Tengo. She seemed to be struggling to understand the words that Tengo had spoken.

"You want to rewrite the story," she asked.

Tengo looked straight into her eyes. "I think I do."

A faint flash crossed Fuka-Eri's black pupils, as if they were projecting something. Or at least they looked that way to Tengo.

Tengo held his hands out, as if he were supporting an



imaginary box in the air. The gesture had no particular meaning, but he needed some kind of imaginary medium like that to convey his feelings. "I don't know how to put it exactly," he said, "but in reading *Air Chrysalis* over and over, I began to feel that I could see what you were seeing. Especially when the Little People appear. Your imagination has some special kind of power. It's entirely original, and quite contagious."

Fuka-Eri quietly set her spoon on her plate and dabbed at her mouth with her napkin.

"The Little People really exist," she said softly.

"They really exist?"

Fuka-Eri paused before she said, "Just like you and me."

"Just like you and me," Tengo repeated.

"You can see them if you try."

Her concise speaking style was strangely persuasive. From every word that came to her lips, he felt a precise, wedge-like thrust. He still could not tell, though, how seriously he should take her. There was something out of the ordinary about her, a screw slightly loose. It was an inborn quality, perhaps. He might be in the presence of an authentic talent in its most natural form, or it could all be an act. Intelligent teenage girls were often instinctively theatrical, purposely eccentric, mouthing highly suggestive words to confuse people. He had seen a number of such cases when it was impossible to distinguish the real thing from acting. Tengo decided to bring the conversation back to reality—or, at least, something closer to reality.

"As long as it's okay with you, I'd like to start rewriting *Air Chrysalis* tomorrow."

"If that is what you want to do."

"It *is* what I want to do," Tengo replied.

"There's someone to meet," Fuka-Eri said.

"Someone you want *me* to meet?"

She nodded.

"Now, who could that be?"

She ignored his question. "To talk to," she added.

SHE IGNORED HIS QUESTION. TO TALK TO, SHE ADDED.

"I don't mind," Tengo said, "if it's something I should do."

"Are you free Sunday morning?" she asked, without a question mark.

"I am," Tengo said. *It's as if we're talking in semaphore*, he thought.

They finished eating and parted. At the door of the restaurant, Tengo slipped a few ten-yen coins into the pay phone and called Komatsu's work number. He was still in his office, but it took him a while to come to the phone. Tengo waited with the receiver on his ear.

"How did it go?" Komatsu asked right away.

"Fuka-Eri is basically okay with me rewriting *Air Chrysalis*, I think."

"That's great!" Komatsu exclaimed. "Marvelous! To tell you the truth, I was a little worried about you. I mean, you're not exactly the negotiator type."

"I didn't do any negotiating," Tengo said. "I didn't have to convince her. I just explained the main points, and she pretty much decided on her own."

"I don't care how you did it. The results are what count. Now we can go ahead with the plan."

"Except that I have to meet somebody first."

"Meet somebody? Who?"

"I don't know. She wants me to meet this person and talk."

Komatsu kept silent for a few seconds. "So when are you supposed to do that?"

"This Sunday. She's going to take me there."

"There's one important rule when it comes to keeping secrets," Komatsu said gravely. "The fewer people who know the secret, the better. So far, only three of us know about the plan—you, me, and Fuka-Eri. If possible, I'd like to avoid increasing that number. You understand, don't you?"

“In theory,” Tendo said.

Komatsu’s voice softened as he said, “Anyhow, Fuka-Eri is ready to have you rewrite her manuscript. That’s the most important thing. We can work out the rest.”

Tendo switched the receiver to his left hand and slowly pressed his right index finger against his temple. “To be honest,” he said to Komatsu, “this is making me nervous. I don’t have any real grounds for saying so, but I have this strong feeling that I’m being swept up in something out of the ordinary. I didn’t feel it when I was with Fuka-Eri, but it’s been getting stronger since she left. Call it a premonition, or just a funny feeling, but there is something strange going on here. Something out of the ordinary. I feel it less with my mind than my whole body.”

“Was it meeting Fuka-Eri that made you feel this way?”

“Maybe so. She’s probably the real thing. This is just my gut feeling, of course.”

“You mean that she has real talent?”

“I don’t know about her talent,” Tendo said. “I’ve just met her, after all. But she may actually be seeing things that you and I can’t see. She might have something special. That’s what’s bothering me.”

“You mean she might have mental issues?”

“She’s definitely eccentric, but I don’t think she’s crazy. There’s a logical thread to what she says, more or less. It’s just that ... I don’t know ... something’s bothering me.”

“In any case, did she take an interest in you?” Komatsu asked.

Tendo searched for the appropriate words with which to answer him, but was unable to find them. “I really can’t say about that,” he replied.

“Well, she met you, and she must have thought you were qualified to rewrite *Air Chrysalis*. That means she liked you. Good work, Tendo! What happens from here

on out, I don't know, either. There is some risk, of course. But risk is the spice of life. Start rewriting the manuscript right away. We don't have any time to lose. I've got to return the rewritten manuscript to the pile of entries as soon as possible, switch it for the original. Can you do the job in ten days?"

Tengo sighed. "What a taskmaster!"

"Don't worry, you don't have to make it absolutely polished. We can still touch it up in the next stage. Just get it into reasonably good shape."

Tengo did a general estimate of the job in his head. "If that's the case, I might be able to pull it off in ten days. It's still going to be a huge job, though."

"Just give it everything you've got," Komatsu urged him cheerfully. "Look at the world through her eyes. You'll be the go-between—connecting Fuka-Eri's world and the real world we live in. I know you can do it, Tengo, I just—"

At this point the last ten-yen coin ran out.

## CHAPTER 5

### Aomame

#### A PROFESSION REQUIRING SPECIALIZED TECHNIQUES AND TRAINING

After finishing her job and exiting the hotel, Aomame walked a short distance before catching a cab to yet