PERISH

BY

THE

SWORD

POUL ANDERSON

WINNER OF THE COCK ROBIN MYSTERY AWARD
PERISH
BY THE
SWORD
TO
REGINALD AND HELEN BRETNOR
OF CATS AND KATANAS
Except for Senzo Muramasa, all persons in this book are fictitious. This includes, especially, members of the Berkeley Police Department, who in real life would doubtless have proceeded otherwise than here represented. Neither the D & C Metallurgic Laboratories nor the Howl have any substantial counterpart. The sword collectors' club in the story has no relationship whatsoever to actual groups of this type. All incidents of the narrative are equally imaginary. However, as of this writing, postal policy within the State of California is exactly as described.
Clouds were massing in the west, but it was still a clear night for early November. From the window where he stood, Michael Stefanik could look down, across the glitter of San Francisco and the darkness of the Bay, to those hills which enclosed the farther shore. They were strewn with firefly light, their own cities, against a windy sky. He wondered, in a moment that hurt, if he could actually see Janice’s home. But of course not. She lived below, in the general haze of lamps.

“Well,” said Trygve Yamamura, “I suppose we should be on our way also. It’s now officially Monday, and in eight hours I’m supposed to look alert or something.”

Stefanik pulled his gaze from the view. Nob Hill was more than a good address; it was seeing the great two-footed stride of the Bay Bridge, or the lovely curve men had thrown across the Golden Gate, or ships standing in past blue islands, whenever you wished. He paid more rent than he could afford for his own place in Berkeley, just because of the horizon it commanded. Pereira’s books and swords were interesting, the man himself a delight, but for Stefanik the prospect from Pereira’s flat was reason enough to wish this club met oftener.

The living room seemed unduly quiet, now that the others had left. Stefanik thought his host must often find it lonesome. But the financier didn’t look sorry for himself. He had picked
up Stefanik’s Muramasa sword and was hefting it in the plain wooden scabbard.

“You needn’t dash off for my sake,” he said. “Good of you to bring this specimen once again, Michael. Hoshikawa was extremely interested. I think it’s hooked him into joining for certain. And the club does need new blood.”

Stefanik smiled. He was a well-built man, his unusually wide shoulders making him look shorter than the actual five feet ten. His face was broad, with high cheekbones, square jaw, green eyes, slightly hooked nose; the reddish-brown hair was conventionally brush-cut. Only a hint of accent, coloring his General American, bespoke the first nine years of his life, which had been spent in Prague. Now he was twenty-eight, and a free-lance translator.

“I’m always glad to lug Exhibit A over here,” he said. “I’ll never own a better conversation piece.”

“About expanding the membership,” went on Pereira, “wasn’t Keith Deacon supposed to come with you tonight?”

“He called me this afternoon and said he couldn’t make it,” replied Stefanik. “Busy, partly his own work and partly getting his wife off tomorrow. She’s visiting her parents in Philadelphia. Deacon said he didn’t even have time to take her on the farewell celebration they’d planned. She went to the play with Janice Culquhoun instead.”

Oswaldo Pereira glanced up from the sword. He was tall, close to sixty but erect and supple. A mustache crossed straight dark features, almost boyishly smooth; his hair was brushed back, gray only at the temples. He wore a linen suit that managed, by sheer quality, to be more noticeable than Stefanik’s sports jacket or Yamamura’s noisy aloha shirt.

“D’you think Deacon is seriously interested?” he asked.

Stefanik shrugged. “You know him better than I do.”

“He seems to have come out of his shell with a pop, in the
last few months. Not that he was ever an introvert, much, but now suddenly he takes an interest in everything and everybody. However—I don't meant to backbite—it's a little superficial. He probably thinks a Japanese sword collectors' club is an amusing new excuse for a coffee klatch."

"It is," said Yamamura. He poured himself another small shot of Scotch. "If you define 'coffee' rather loosely."

"It shouldn't be," Pereira grew earnest. "I hate to sound pompous, but this outfit ought to be so much more than a talkfest meeting at irregular intervals. I needn't tell you how worth preserving the Samurai blades are—you know as well as I, there are more in the United States now than are left in Japan—how many are being ruined because of ignorance. Someone has to educate the public, before it's too late!"

He drew Stefanik's weapon with the single motion of an expert. Steel flashed white in his hand. He was a fencer of some distinction, but this instrument was not meant to thrust or hack. He sent the edge hissing along an arc.

Narrow dark eyes gleamed in Yamamura's long face. "That was a nice blow," he said, very softly. "If a man had been in your way, he'd be in two pieces now. You've got the touch, Oswaldo."

Pereira laughed, with a bit of self-consciousness, and turned his wrist so that light rippled along the metal. The blade was a Koto katana, of shinogi-zukuri type, with a nie temper line in the notare form and itame-hada grain. The untrained eye saw a slender low-backed shape, subtly curved, where a pattern like ghostly wood burl ran in waves just above the edge. The guard was an elegant filigree circle with some remnants of ancient gold inlay. The hilt was a modern replacement, wood covered with pebbly sharkskin that showed through tape wrappings; but its form also pleased. The over-all length was a little over three and a half feet, the age not quite six hundred years.
Which are all cataloguer's words, having little to do with the fact that Senzo Muramasa of Ise had once hammered out a keen and terrible beauty.

"It's more the sword than my skill," said Pereira. "It's so wonderfully balanced, it almost wields me. D'you know, I could wish for a chance to use one sometime—really use it, as the smith himself intended— What?" He lowered the weapon, startled.

Yamamura's lean body jerked toward relaxation. For an instant, it had been as if he were about to spring on the other man. He twisted his mouth into a sort of grin. "Nothing," he said,

"What's wrong, Trig?" asked Stefanik.

"Nothing," repeated Yamamura. His tone was close to anger. He got out pipe and tobacco pouch and tamped the bowl with quick violent motions. "Skip it."

Pereira considered him for a moment. A burly-chested six-footer, Trygve Yamamura showed his Norwegian half most. Flat broad-nosed face, amber skin, thinning black hair, the barest tilt of eyes were all that the detective had from his father. On the outside, said an unvoiced thought.

"Oh. I understand." Pereira nodded. "I shouldn't have expressed such a wish. Muramasa blades kill people, don't they?"

Yamamura's chuckle was harsh. "Everybody's entitled to one superstition," he said. "Since I don't believe in chlorophyll gum or credit buying, do me a favor and sheathe that thing, will you?"

Pereira dusted the metal with talcum powder and slid it back into the scabbard. Yamamura struck a match. The noise ripped through silence.

"Uh—we were talking about enlarging the club," said Stefanik, hoping to get off ground that didn't appear quite safe. "Keith Deacon could be very valuable in an educational program—uh—such as you spoke of. I mean, he's had public
relations experience and so on. We could bring him in even if he doesn’t own any blade yet or isn’t going to be a—uh—pro-
found student.” He rubbed his forehead with a clenched fist.
“Why don’t you urge him too, Oswaldo? After all, you’re a
partner in his business.”

Pereira scowled. Suddenly he was as taut as Yamamura had
been, and his tone roughened: “Perhaps not for much longer.”

“Hm?” Stefanik blinked surprise.

“Never mind. It’s a dirty affair.” Pereira poured a stiff
whisky and tossed it off straight. “Oh, Deacon himself is okay.
But Culquhoun—” His eyes sought Stefanik’s and he said
slowly, as if feeling his way: “D’you know, I’ve always felt
that a person’s deserts depended on himself. It’s less of a sin
to rob a thief than an honest man, or— Well, Michael, your
own case, now. It’s all right by me.”

“What on earth do you mean?” asked Stefanik, bewildered.

“About Culquhoun.” Pereira nodded toward a picture of his
dead wife, seated among children who had since grown up
and gone into the world. “I was always a family man, Michael.
A leftover Victorian, or as much so as the son of a dago
restaurant keeper could be. Not that I would ever meddle in
anyone else’s private life, but a man’s behavior could lower
my opinion of him. Yours has not, though. Not under the cir-
cumstances.”

Stefanik knew a feeling of being caught in a river, with
nothing solid to grasp. “What am I supposed to have done?”
he blurted.

“As far as I am concerned, Arthur Culquhoun deserves what-
ever you or anyone might do to him.” Pereira shrugged.
“Enough said. It really is none of my business.”

“But—”

Does he mean Janice?

For an instant, rage flapped up in Stefanik. That Pereira
would dare hint such a thing about her!
The emotion passed. Wryness followed. *Talk about your Freudian slips,* Stefanik told himself. *No, Oswaldo couldn’t have meant anything except—well—oh, forget it.*

Yamamura studied both of them. He hazed his face in smoke, grinned, and murmured, “Apropos nothing except that it’s feelthy, have you heard—” The joke led to others, and the meeting dissolved into a half hour of pleasant trivia.

“Well, Mike,” said Yamamura finally, “we really had better get back to Berkeley.” They had come over together, in his staid Volkswagen. “You can wear that midget sports car of yours if you want,” he had informed Stefanik, “but if I must catch pneumonia I refuse to do so with my knees rattling on my Adam’s apple.”

The air outside was raw, and by now the clouds had eaten half the sky. There were no clear-cut seasons hereabouts, but this was the rainy time of year. Yamamura shivered. “I should’a stood in Hawaii, where I at least had the brains to be born,” he said. “There’s a storm coming, and it’s going to be hairy.”
A couple of miles from the Bay shore and north of the University, the Berkeley hills rear up so steeply that many eastbound streets turn themselves, for a block-length or so, into lanes. Stefanik lived on such a path. It was little more than a set of steps. On the left, as you trudged uphill, the ground was too slanted for construction; only trees and half-wild rosebushes could be seen. On the right were three houses in a row, screened from each other by eucalyptus and high hedges. This was a neighborhood of people who could pay for elbow room and foliage. Even the streets above and below the hillside were not densely lined with homes.

Stefanik’s flat was the upper half of the middle house. A young couple, both of whom worked, lived under him. Since they did not collect books, swords, Mozart records, or mountains to climb—while he refused to own a television set and swore the only card game fit for human consumption was no-limit poker—his relationship with them was not intimate. The building itself was a pleasant spacious affair of gray shingles, but he had taken it because the living room faced west on immensity.

This Monday morning there was little to see. A wild rainfall about sunrise had ended, but now fog smoked white along the ground, the Bay was lost to view, he could only look down
and see how treetops below his window gleamed with moisture. He lit his first cigarette of the day and inhaled sensuously.

The doorbell buzzed. What the deuce: special delivery, perhaps? Stefanik necessarily arranged his life around the postman. He hurried downstairs and unlatched his spring-locked door.

Janice stood there.

“Oh—good morning!” he exclaimed. For some reason, words were hard to find. His heart began to thutter, as if he were running.

“I’m sorry, Mike.” Her smile was unhappy. “I’ve lost my key.”

“Gad! Horrible! It’ll cost all of two bits to get a duplicate. I sentence you to five years of hard labor making straw without bricks.” Stefanik halted and swore at himself. How schoolboy was a man allowed to get?

“I looked everywhere,” she said, a little frantically, as if afraid he would talk of something important. “I know I had it Saturday, because I was looking in my purse for something else. But then yesterday, when I was making ready to go out with Rhea Deacon, I noticed it was gone, and I searched but—”

“Forget it.” He stood aside to let her pass. “How was the show?”

“Good. It’s a shame Keith missed it.” She ran on upstairs. His eyes followed her.

Janice Kingsley Culquhoun was tall, slender and long-legged, with a graceful though not opulent figure. Her blond hair was shingled close to her head, cut off just below the ears. This morning there were tiny fog-drops caught in it, like diamonds. Her face was oval, snub nose and generous mouth, eyes brown and faintly oblique under arched dark brows. She didn’t have many elements of conventional prettiness, Stefanik thought for the hundredth time, but the over-all effect was—oh, well. Too late now. He went up after her.
The living room clock showed nine-thirty, their normal working hour. Stefanik was not given to early rising. And on days when he had to go look up some reference, or simply felt the weather too pleasant to stay indoors, his assistant had need for a key of her own.

Janice was removing her topcoat in the living room. The green dress beneath made him think of forests. Suddenly, like a knife, he remembered the Böhmerwald, one summer when he was small. Sunlight had come through leaves to speckle brown earth, and his father told him about the English hero Robin Hood as they walked. But that was before Ragnarok.

He went over to help the girl. She nodded at his half-dozen samurai swords, resting sheathed in their racks on top of the crowded bookshelves. Her voice remained uncertain, and she didn’t look at him. “I’ve never understood why you don’t hang at least one bare on the wall,” she said. “They’re so lovely.”

“And what would this wet air do to it?” he answered. “As a matter of fact, I only bought that Norihiro over there in hopes of trading it off for something newer, less romantic, but in better shape. It’s been wrecked by carelessness.”

“I see.” She hung her coat in the closet, still keeping her face averted. “What—what are we going to work on today? I mean, I’ve almost got those Rokosovsky papers typed up, and that clears my desk.”

“I’ve an order for a précis of Soviet archeological research in the Azov region. Someone at the University is interested, but doesn’t read Russian. Till I get it in shape for you to edit and transcribe, I think you might as well work on the Čapek essays.”

“The what?” She half turned her head. A childhood infection had left her a little deaf. It wasn’t enough to require a hearing aid, but she sometimes missed a few spoken words.

“Karel Čapek. Remember? I had a very prosaic rough-draft translation on hand when you first came here. You offered to put it into an English that might do justice to the original—
and since then you’ve proved you have a lot more literary talent than I. So, now you can go to it. Mostly a labor of love, I suppose; though it would also be a prestige job, if we can get it published, and that never hurts.”

“I’ll do my best—” She turned toward the spare bedroom he had made into an office for her. Cool foggy light slid along one flat cheek and over a track of tears.

It was like a blow. And he became aware of how she trembled, and how make-up failed to hide the shadows around her eyes. Her bright head was drooping.

He took a step toward her. “Janice,” he said. “What the hell is wrong?”

Mist in the window framed her with a gray swirling. “Nothing,” she whispered. “I just couldn’t sleep. For some reason. I’d better get busy.”

“No.” As she moved from him, half stumbling, he closed a hand on her wrist. She was strong for a woman. He remembered she had grown up in the Sierra; her father kept a resort and she was even more a creature of pines and high places than himself. But he had a wrestler’s grasp; he stopped her and she stood biting her lip and staring at the floor.

“No,” he repeated. He attempted a smile. “You’re not even an apprentice liar. Come on in the kitchen and let’s have some coffee avec.”

She followed mutely. He busied himself at the stove. Neither of them spoke until he had poured two cups full and added a liberal dose of cognac. He sat down across from her. She jerked up her head to face him and said haggardly: “It’s no affair of yours, Mike. Don’t ask.”

“Ich kann nicht anders,” he quoted in sadness.

“Why?” she flung at him. “Why should you care?”

He decided not to answer. Instead: “I can’t help knowing something anyhow. Your husband’s been at it again. Right?”

She nodded and picked up her cup in both unsteady hands.
"I got home about one last night," she said, so low he could barely hear it. "Arthur was gone. He hadn't said anything in the afternoon about leaving, only urged me to go out with Rhea—he'd been over at the Deacons' a little earlier, to discuss some business, and that was when Keith explained he couldn't take her to the show and offered his ticket to me— Why am I telling you this?"

With the pain of it sharp within him, Stefanik said, "You don't have anyone else to listen, do you?"

"Pardon me?" She tilted her most useful ear to him.

"Never mind," he sighed. He groped after a cigarette, but the jeans and tee shirt he preferred for working hours didn't carry any. Janice had laid her purse on the table. He cocked a brow at her, she smiled shakily and nodded, he took her pack out and they both lit up. She inhaled raggedly, coughing a trifle. She had only taken up smoking in the past year or so. Since marrying Arthur Culquhoun.

Stefanik knuckled his forehead and drew hard on his own cigarette. "I take it he didn't come in all night," he said.

"No." Calmer now, she blew on her coffee and took a small swallow. "I phoned everywhere, of course, but nobody knew. This morning, before coming to work, I called the lab. He was there. He only—only muttered something about being busy—I did make him promise to be home this evening."

Now if it could be shown that that bastard was out chasing some female! The savagery of his own thought was faintly shocking to Stefanik. I wonder if Trig would— No. He refuses to handle divorce cases. And I won't let any grubby little professional snooper hear about this.

Wearily: Janice wouldn't permit it anyway. If Culquhoun has been unfaithful to her, she'll just wonder how she failed him.

He couldn't help himself, he said aloud, "He's leading you a devil's life. This is only the latest thing he's done to you."
"Shut up!" she yelled.

She sprang to her feet. For a moment, he thought she would dash her coffee in his face, and threw up an arm. Then she sat down again and began to cry. It wasn't loud. Stefanik chain-smoked two more cigarettes and cursed himself.

Janice looked up at last. "I'm sorry," she gulped.

"I should be the one to apologize," he answered dully.

"We have our troubles," she said. "But don't misunderstand them. Arthur hasn't had an easy life. He worked his way up from poverty, he's never quite shaken off his Calvinistic background, he drives himself too hard and finally his nerves can't take any more. You only met him in this—this phase—the early part of it. You don't know how sweet he was before." She threw back her head. Color flared across the high-boned face. "He will be again! I can take care of myself, and him too!"

"Sure," said Stefanik.

Janice's coffee had cooled enough to be finished at a draught. She refused a second and spoke with steadiness: "I'm all right now, Mike. Thanks ever so much. If you'll just let me fool around with the correspondence and files and so on till lunch, I'll be quite human again. I'll tackle Čapek in the afternoon."

"Before he crosses the goal line, I hope," said Stefanik.

She laughed more than it deserved, and went quickly into her office. The door closed behind her. Presently he heard her typewriter begin to click.

She really would do a competent job, too, he thought, even with a mind full of misery. It was more than he was able. He wandered glumly to his desk in the living room.

A heap of books and journals waited, preliminary references taken from his own shelves and the public library. These would give him a lead on still more articles in other collections. Eventually he would have enough material to summarize Azov archeology for his client. Hm, he thought, better include a
critical note, warning the reader to allow for Marxism. Soviet work nowadays seemed less influenced by dogma than formerly, but Stefanik remembered that the gospel according to Karl postulated agriculture had evolved from nomadism (the reverse is actually the case) and this might well bias even a scientific report.

He worked half-heartedly for a couple of hours, his mind mostly on Janice, and was glad when the mail gave him an excuse to knock off. He read Pravda with more care than usual, just to postpone anything requiring real concentration. The girl found him thus when she emerged for lunch.

"Oh-ho!" she said. "I'm going straight to the Internal Security Committee and tell them what a desperate character I work for."

"I'm sure they already know, after my hassle with the Post Office Department," he said.

"How's that? You never told me."

She really did seem herself again. Almost. Stefanik felt his muscles ease, one by one. "The California headquarters of the P.O. is so much purer than the Federal that I had a devil of a time getting this rag delivered when I subscribed. I still have to go down occasionally and wrest a magazine or book from some Communist country out of them by main force. Of course, the fact that I could at any time read these things in the University library has no relationship to our postmaster's desire that I be protected from information."

She wrinkled her nose at the paper. "Does that thing contain information?"

"Sure. Information content has no relationship to truth value. A stick insect informs you that it's a twig, doesn't it? I need to know what's being said behind the Curtain. My livelihood depends on it. But I assure you, Janice, I'm still a—uh—filthy reactionary enemy of all the peace-loving peoples."

"I've heard you rant." She accompanied him back into the
kitchen, where she spread out her own lunch. She had quietly refused his original idea, that they fix their midday meal to-
gether. He could see why: five days a week, alone in his living quarters, was a delicate enough situation. But she had begun
imitating his open-faced sandwiches, salami, ripe cheese, egg
and anchovy on pumpernickel.

"Any interesting mail?" she asked.

"One offer that I'll have to turn down. Too busy. I think I'll incorporate myself. Instead of selling watered stock, I'll sell
brandied stock and have the very best public relations." He
was still trying to keep reality at arm's length.

She laughed without fakery. He stole a glance at her. God
damn it, he thought in renewed dismay, if I can't fall out of
love with the wench I'll have to fire her, and she's too bloody
useful!

When he settled in Berkeley, a year and a half ago, he had
not expected to make more than a reasonable living. He did
have a range of languages, Romance and Germanic as well as
Slavic, so broad that he could read the others without formal
study. A boyhood hobby of radio, some college chemistry and
physics courses, subsequent wide reading, had equipped him
to handle scientific as well as journalistic translation. He hoped
he could be his own boss and have time for his other interests;
that was enough.

Then the Russians put Sputnik in the sky, and Michael
Stefanik suddenly had more commissions than he could handle.

A general assistant was called for: a secretary who could
also polish his initial translations, let him check her work for
accuracy, and type a final version. Janice was the one. Since
she joined him, a little after New Year's, they had become a
good team.

Well—

He held the talk firmly to inconsequentials. After lunch
he went out and had his door key copied for her.
And the day passed.

Janice went home on the bus about three-thirty. Stefanik noticed how tense she had grown again. She didn’t even hear his goodbye. He said an oath and poured himself a drink. Time drew toward evening.

The hell with making his own supper, he decided at last. The hell with everything. He went down twilight stairs, under heavy leaves, to the street where his little MG was parked. He snaked it through commuter traffic to a downtown gym and worked out for a couple of hours. Then he bought himself a good sea-food dinner—but Lord, how lonesome it was!—and went on a pub crawl.

That wasn’t a real drunk, just a good many schooners of beer. He ended up in an intellectual-type bar, where he baited a liberal with his scheme for turning the world into an old-fashioned Oriental monarchy. His mood was almost happy when he got home, felt his way up a pitchy lane and his inside stair, and poured himself into bed. Sleep came with hoped-for swiftness.

He wasn’t sure what time he awoke. He sat up, listening to silence. The room was grave-black around him. His brain thumped a little from alcohol. But there had been a noise. Hadn’t there?

A thin yellow ray cut through shadows. The bedroom door, ajar, creaked very faintly as it swung wider. It stopped at once, the pencil of light vanished, stillness clamped down. Stefanik shook his head, wondering in a vague chilled fashion if he was having a nightmare.

No. The ray went past the door again, sickled across his bedclothes and back to the floor.

_Burglar!_ Stefanik grew rigid. His pulse racketed in his ears. His skin prickled.

The door opened in a rush. Shod feet hurried across boards. Stefanik glimpsed a deeper shadow. It loomed over him till
it seemed to touch the ceiling. The flashlight radiance skimmed his face. He thought he heard a whispered curse at his wakefulness.

He rolled over and scrambled free of the blankets. Something thumped behind him. Whirling around, he saw the flashbeam touch curved metal, half buried in the mattress. Then the light snapped out.

The one he couldn't see pulled the sword loose and glided around the bed. Stefanik heard deep panting. "What is this?" he yelled. It sounded faraway and strange. "What do you want?"

He felt, rather than saw the charge. He sprang aside. The sword whirred. Stefanik shouted, turned, and ran. The floor quivered from the weight of that which bounded in pursuit. Stefanik dashed out the bedroom door. A part of him found sense enough to slam it. Half a second later, a body crashed against the panels with a monstrously heavy impact. The door-knob twisted. Stefanik braced himself in murk, roaring for help.

His hands were slippery with sweat. They wouldn't grip the knob. It turned in his fingers. The door was pushed open so violently that he reeled backward. Enough light oozed through a window to show him the sword blade, like a pale flame.

"Help! For God's sake, help!"

Stefanik leaped across the hall, into his dining room. There must be something—yes, his own swords, if he lived to reach them—

"What's going on?"

The voice came from the foot of the stairs. Bill Thomson, the man below, stood calling. He had a flashlight, and shot the beam upward. Stefanik realized dimly that Thomson must have come through the open outside door; and yet that door had a spring lock. Once shut it needed a key to be opened, and
Stefanik knew he had closed it this night— "What's the trouble?"

Stefanik lurched down the steps. Breath was hot and dry in his gullet. "Someone tried to kill me," he got out.

"What?" Thomson cocked his head. "I don't hear anything now."

Stefanik leaned against the wall. His knees didn't seem quite able to support him. "Maybe gone," he mumbled.

"Shall I call the police?"

Somewhere, Stefanik found a measure of strength. He shivered and stood up. "Not yet. Will you follow me? I d-d-don't think two of us would be attacked."

The rooms above were caverns of darkness. But as he snapped on one switch after another, Stefanik thought they looked even more empty in the light. It was as if no one had ever lived here. He saw, with a dull shock, that his Muramasa blade was gone from the enameled rack of honor. He drew another sword at random and led the way on into his bedroom. A sheet knotted to a chair, which was jammed across the open window, showed him how the intruder had departed.
The D & C Metallurgic Laboratories lay in an industrial district of Oakland. They filled a square, two-story brick building set between two similar neighbors, with narrow alleys running through to a common parking lot in the rear. The streets around that block growled with trucks; smokestacks raked a dusty sky; in the background, the freeway rose on huge pillars and whirled a river of cars south toward downtown and north toward Berkeley.

Stefanik found a place for his MG and walked through the back entrance. A workshop on his left yelled at him as metal protested distortion. He looked away from the harsh blue flicker of a welding torch. On his right, a technician sat staring into the eyepiece of an optical pyrometer. The bench behind was crowded with the haywire disorder of an experimental setup. Passing on into a main room, Stefanik saw four men clustered around an electronic furnace: presumably waiting to see how some new heat treatment was going to work. Beyond lay quieter chambers, where X rays, spectroscopy, and less comprehensible senses probed molecular lattices. Two doors carried the trefoil warning of radioactive isotopes.

Seems to be more people around than last time I visited, he thought. It's starting to prosper. Must employ a dozen highly trained men by now, plus their assistants and the menial help.
And he remembered, reluctantly, that Arthur Culquhoun had been the catalyst to bring this about.

Stefanik glanced at his watch as he started upstairs. Nine-thirty. Janice would be letting herself into his flat. He hadn’t felt able to face her—not until he had completed what was necessary here. He had driven aimlessly into the hills after a few night hours of trying to get back to sleep. Then he dawdled over breakfast, and now arrived ninety minutes after the lab opened. But who wouldn’t stall? Judas priest!

The second story was in large part a single room. Four laboratory benches ran parallel to fill most of the space: hard black tops, cabinets below and shelves of chemicals above, sinks, outlets for water, gas, air, and vacuum. A couple of men worked with a polarimeter; otherwise the section seemed empty. As he topped the stairs, Stefanik had a broad window opening on the parking lot at his back. Across the width of the laboratory he faced a wall bounding the offices of Deacon and a secretary. The window on his right overlooked an alley and the unrelieved brick of the next building. To his left were closed doors marked Arthur Culquhoun and Roy Linden.

He hesitated. It jerked in his nerves. What to do? He could get Culquhoun aside, privately, and—what? No, better probe elsewhere. I could be wrong, after all. Oh, God, please let me be wrong.

The secretary, plain, middle-aged, and aggressively efficient, looked out of her sanctum. “Did you want to see Mr. Deacon?” she asked. “He’s in conference, engineerwise, but I can intercom him.”

“Never mind.” Even then, Stefanik reflected that modern business English was enough to drive a man to socialism. He opened the other door and stepped into the main office. His errand couldn’t wait.

A streetside window threw sunlight in his eyes. He felt a
brief wonder that people should walk down there in dailiness. It wasn’t quite possible: not when he, last night, had faced whetted steel. Under the window was a long table cluttered with tools and apparatus. Stefanik recognized an oscilloscope, a transformer, some relays, a tape recorder, a microscope, a desk calculator, and miscellaneous junk. Though Deacon’s personal efforts were concentrated on the financial side of affairs, he had an engineering degree of his own. Then too, storage space was always a problem when a gadget might be used once in five years but was then indispensable.

Deacon’s big desk was at the far end, away from the door connecting with the secretary’s office. He looked up, startled. “Oh—Mike. What’s the matter?”

“Plenty.” Stefanik gathered his will and strode forward. This had to be done. “Can I see you—uh—alone?”

“Surely. You know Roy Linden, don’t you?”

Stefanik shook hands with Deacon’s senior engineer, who had risen. “Yes, we’ve met a time or two. Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt, but—”

“That’s okay.” Roy Linden was a thin brown man of medium height, with bushy black hair, a long head, gaunt face, full lips and Roman nose. Horn-rimmed glasses seemed to sharpen his dark glance. A slide rule stuck out of one pocket in his smock. “I was just tryin’ to get the boss here to buy us a Beckman. He wants to spend more money on advertisin’ instead.” His voice had a nasal drawl; Stefanik remembered remarking on it once, and the engineer answering that he was born in Oklahoma.

“Roy has a subconscious conviction that science and solvency don’t mix,” laughed Deacon. “I keep telling him and telling him, this is a commercial enterprise, I tell him, and we have to buck tax laws which encourage corporations to build their own research facilities instead of turning their problems over to us. Let us once get enough business, and he can have his Beck-
man. Also a digital computer, a cyclotron, a spaceship, and a beautiful blonde.”

“You can skip the blonde,” said Linden. “I’m satisfied with what I’ve got.” Hastily, as if he had shown too much feeling: “Or how about that thing of Art’s? The—uh—Tomek process. He’s been about as communicative as a frozen oyster, and so’ve you been, Keith. But I got the impression it might turn out to be a big thing. Might make us able to buy some really good equipment.”

“It might at that.” Deacon waved a hand at an extra chair. “Sit down, Mike. I’m reminded that I may have a further job for you in just that project. Can you take a day off sometime soon?”

“Well—” Stefanik lowered himself. The need to be done with his wretched mission boiled in him. Almost, he yelled it forth. But slowly, with an effort: “What’s come up? I understood the papers I translated for you were all that old Tomek ever wrote, before the Communists arrested him.”

“Quite so,” nodded Deacon. “But they probably had some inkling of what he was doing. Maybe they interrogated him before he died. Remember, I asked you to watch the Soviet journals for any hints of such research.”

“I haven’t noticed anything.”

“Well, recently I met a fellow down at Stanford who was in Russia this summer, one of those scientific delegation deals. He talked with a physicist in Moscow, who gave him some notes— Anyhow, I’m not sure just what is involved, but I might ask you to go down and look at those papers.” Deacon offered cigarettes and lit one himself. “You know we want to spring this on the world, a fait accompli. If the Russians are working on the same lines, we’ll have to speed up our own project. Otherwise we’d never get a patent.”

“Okay. Let me know.” Stefanik drew smoke deeply into his lungs. He needed it.
“Excuse me a minute.” Linden went behind the desk and into Deacon’s private washroom. It formed an L with the office, its window overlooking the alley gloom. As the door closed behind him, Deacon leaned forward.

“All right, Mike,” he said gently, “what’s the trouble?”

Stefanik considered him. Keith Deacon was about his own height, slender and rather stoop-shouldered. Now in the early forties, he was barely getting fat around the middle, but he still moved with grace and a wiry strength remained to him. His face was smooth, a large nose and small chin, reddish hair receding so far that his brow looked higher than it was. The mobile mouth and the downward slant of the gray eyes gave him a somehow kindly expression. Alone of everyone in his establishment, he wore an expensive business suit; a pair of reading glasses lay in the breast pocket.

Stefanik licked dry lips. “I wish to hell I knew,” he said. “It may be nothing that concerns you at all.”

Deacon sat back and waited. It was the most calming thing he could have done. Stefanik recalled how often Deacon had shown that intuitive, almost feminine understanding of human nuances.

“Culquhoun—” began Stefanik. He stopped while a truck bellowed under the window. “Someone tried to kill me last night,” he said jaggedly. “It may have been Arthur Culquhoun.”

Deacon raised brows, but didn’t stir. “What makes you think so?” His tone kept its softness.

“It was a very big man,” Stefanik said, word by slow word. “I hardly saw him, but— He knew the layout of my place. He got one of my swords. That was his weapon. The Culquhouns have been dinner guests of mine a few times.”

“Suppose you tell me exactly what happened.”

“Wait till we’re alone.” Stefanik glanced at the washroom door. “Keith,” he said, and it was a beggary, “you know Culquhoun better than anyone else. Even his own wife. What’s wrong with him?”
“Nothing fundamental,” said Deacon. “He probably could benefit from psychiatry, but—”

Linden came out. “Excuse,” he said. “I couldn’t help overhearin’ a little. None o’ my business, I guess, but there’s no ‘probably’ about it.”

A frown flickered on Deacon’s countenance. “You’ve known him for the three years you’ve been working here, Roy,” he said. “He’s been my partner for five, and I knew him as a friend for a couple of years before that. He gets these surly fits, but he gets over them too.”

“More’n that, the past few weeks,” said Linden. “I can tell when a man’s sluggin’ the bottle. And I realize you and he are keepin’ your mouths shut about how that Tomek research is goin’—but he doesn’t have to call me names I could sue him for, when I happen to walk into his office. He doesn’t have to fire that one assistant cold, just for remarkin’ at lunchtime one day that things are progressin’ fine. Art Culquhoun’s goin’ to hell on a greased runway, Keith, and I know you know it.”

His voice, flat and quick with an anger Stefanik did not quite understand, came to a halt. He stood a few seconds, watching the other two men out of a face gone blank. Then he snapped: “Sorry. I’m speakin’ out o’ turn.” He nodded curtly and went out the office door.

Deacon looked after him. “Don’t mind Roy,” he said at last. “A good man, but he’s hypersensitive. Peeved, too. He’d like to become more than just a glorified hireling, and I myself think it might not be a bad idea. But so far Art won’t hear of it.”

He leveled his gaze back on Stefanik. “All right,” he ordered. “Now let’s have the story.”

When it had been stumbled through, he sat altogether quiet a while. At last: “What did the police think?”

“What could they?” answered Stefanik wearily. “A burglar had gotten in somehow, taken one of my swords, tangled with me, and escaped with his loot. There were footprints under my
window, a big man, but what does that mean? No one's been
turned up who saw anything in the street at that hour. No
identifiable fingerprints on any doorknobs, which it's certain
he touched. And what does a fingerprint anywhere else prove,
unless it belongs to a total stranger?"

"Except for the size of the intruder, are there any reasons to
think it might have been Art?"

"Too many," groaned Stefanik. "I checked with Janice on the
phone this morning, not telling her what had happened, of
course. Just pretending a friendly interest in her troubles. She
said he'd come home all right yesterday, but stormed out again
and stayed away. She has no idea where he went. My enemy
must have let himself in with a key; and Janice lost her own
key to my place this weekend—her husband could easily have
stolen it. As I said, this man knew my arrangements. He went
straight to the swords. He took one with its scabbard, pre-
sumably knowing how dangerous the naked blade could be to
him, a point I always emphasize when I show the things off.
He entered my bedroom, found my bed, and didn't have much
trouble chasing me through my own flat in the dark. Nothing
else was disturbed. This wasn't for money."

"Unless the sword is valuable," suggested Deacon.

"It is." Stefanik rubbed a fist over his forehead. "The pride
of my collection, the one which really started me on that
hobby. I picked it up in Japan in 1956. Got it very cheap,
partly because the original mounting and ori-kami certificate
were lost, partly because the owner knew it was a Muramasa
blade and it scared him green. Even so, I paid a few hundred
bucks."

"And maybe the thief could get a few thousand," said
Deacon. "People have often been killed for less."

"Uh-uh. Not when the loot is that easy to trace. Let him try
to sell it and— Besides, why should a burglar have wanted to
kill me? No, it was an attempted murder. Probably he wanted
it to look like suicide.” A gallows humor rose up in Stefanik, he
laughed and added: “If so, he doesn’t know too much about
samurai weapons. You don’t dispose of yourself with a katana.
You use a tanto, a shortsword, the so-called hara-kiri’knife.”
“A homicidal maniac,” ventured Deacon.
“God, how I hope so! Or do I? Because whoever it was is
now loose with one of the deadliest weapons the world has
ever seen.”
It growled in the street.
“Have you mentioned your supicions to the police?” asked
Deacon abruptly.
“No!” Stefanik realized he had shouted. He forced himself
toward calm. “I played the murder angle down, didn’t men-
tion the key, as if this were simply an attack on me caused by
panic during an ordinary burglary. I wanted to see you first,
and— Look, Keith, Janice is a—a friend. If it can possibly be
avoided, I won’t expose her to—” His words faded.
Deacon nodded. The undistinguished intellectual visage had
become grave. “You’re a decent fellow, Mike. Now let’s make
you a sensible one to boot. Why should Art try to kill you?”
“I don’t know,” stammered Stefanik. “It was only—size—and
he’s been hostile to me, the few times we’ve met lately, and—”
“See here,” said Deacon. “He goes through these moody
spells. His first wife couldn’t take it. She divorced him. He
went on a weeks-long bat and lost his job. I’d known him be-
fore, and I recognize genius when it flies before my eyes. I
pulled him out of the gutter, and in three months we’d re-
organized this firm as a partnership. In a year it was showing
a profit again, after a decade in the red. He was at the peak
of his cycle, he was the most magnificent human creature I’ve
ever encountered, when he met Janice last year. Now he has
to come down. I daresay overwork on this Tomek process has
hastened the decline. I’m trying to get him through it easily
this time. His wife will have to bear the brunt, of course. But
that’s the whole why of his behavior. Nothing else. Believe me, Mike. I’m the only real friend Arthur Culquhoun has got, and I know.”

Stefanik let out a long breath. He felt suddenly how his back ached from tension.

“You’re certain?” he whispered.

“Insofar as any of us can be about anyone else.” Deacon ground out the latest cigarette of the discussion. He turned the gesture into a ceremony, his eyes fixed on the ash tray. “I’ll investigate,” he said, “just to be sure. If the results bear out your suspicions at all, I’ll let you know at once. Meanwhile, you’ll do best to forget them.”

“Thanks,” said Stefanik inadequately.

“I think you need a drink,” said Deacon. Extracting a fifth of bourbon and two glasses from a desk drawer, he grinned. “Good excuse for me, at least. Prosit.”

The liquor was relaxing. Stefanik sat back and thought that tonight he would be able to sleep. “How’s your wife?” he asked, out of an idiotic feeling that he must make conversation.

“Haven’t heard yet. She only left yesterday morning, you know. Be gone for a month.”

“Won’t you get lonesome?”

Deacon shrugged. His mouth twitched upward above his glass, ever so faintly. Stefanik thought of rumors he had heard. Keith Deacon married late, and presumably for money; he seemed an indulgent husband, but Rhea was a sluggish woman and gossip said he had not quite lost contact with a discreet demimondaine. Well, that’s his affair. I haven’t been any saint myself.

Presently Stefanik took his leave.

As he went out into the main lab, someone touched his arm. He whipped around, his nerves not yet at ease. Roy Linden’s hollow-cheeked countenance met his glare with an unhappy smile.

26
“Can you give me a minute, Mr. Stefanik? Come in my office.”

It was even more jumbled with equipment than Deacon’s. The engineer closed the door and squared his narrow shoulders. Hastily, staring at his own feet:

“I don’t want to meddle in anybody’s business. But I can see you’re in some kind of trouble involvin’ Art Culquhoun. He’s givin’ you a hard time, isn’t he?”

Stefanik doubled his fists so the nails bit into his palms. “What do you want to tell me?” he snapped.

Linden remained dogged: “Janice is a good friend o’ my wife’s, and I like her a lot myself. I’ve watched her marriage turn into a long series o’ fights, yellin’, or just him sittin’ in the house not talkin’ to her. I think he’s hit her once or twice. I’m not sure where you fit into this, Mr. Stefanik, but—well—maybe you really don’t know what’s bein’ said about you, and it might help matters if you did.”

Stefanik stopped himself from grabbing Linden’s throat. “Go on,” he said.

“I’m not accusin’ you of a thing, Mr. Stefanik. But lately I’ve heard rumors. You know, the boys in the plant talking. Don’t ask me where they got the story. I shut them up quick when they told me. But they said you and Janice were too friendly.”

“What?”

“I tell you, I don’t know a thing myself.” The overhead fluorescent showed sweat beaded on Linden’s temples. “I just wanted to suggest, maybe you—well, maybe you could do somethin’, even stop employin’ her, to end those stories. It might make her life at home easier.” Linden pulled his door open. “That’s all,” he said. “I’ve spoken my piece. Now I got to get busy. So long.”

Stefanik found himself out in the lab. He felt cold.

All at once, not allowing himself to think about it, he crossed
the floor. The technicians at the bench watched him curiously. He had an impression that one of them smirked, and he wanted to break the man's teeth. He reached Culquhoun's door. It was locked. He rapped on the frosted glass panel.

A shadow stirred behind. The latch clicked, and Stefanik pushed through. Bass anger rolled loud in his ears. "What the mucking hell do you want? You know I'm not to be dist—Oh." A machine might then have spoken. "You."

Stefanik looked up. Arthur Culquhoun stood six feet four, and broad to match. His head seemed small for those great shoulders. Beneath straight sandy hair, the face was an Apollo's, thin nose and heavy mouth, level brows, wide-set blue eyes. But the skin was puffy, the rounded chin a stubble field, the shirt had not been changed of late. Even so, he seemed to fill the room like some jinni brewed out of the equipment which crammed it. Stefanik realized with a chill that one of those fists could lay him flat.

"All right," said Culquhoun. He leaned close, overtopping the other man. Stale whisky fouled his breath. "You get sixty seconds to talk. Then out."

"Look," cried Stefanik, "it isn't true! I've just heard there was gossip about me and y-y-your wife—I never dreamed—It isn't true!"

Culquhoun looked elaborately at his watch. "You still have forty-five seconds. Anything else?"

"But for God's sake, won't you listen?"

"If that's all," said Culquhoun, "you might as well go right now. I've got work even if you don't."

He opened the door. "You can tell her I don't expect to be home tonight either," he said.

Fingers closed numbingly on Stefanik's biceps. Culquhoun shoved, and Stefanik half fell. The door closed behind him. He heard the latch click again.
It was past five when Stefanik could bring himself to return home. He was not quite sober.

He had expected, and more than half hoped, Janice would have left. Then he could have said what he must on the telephone. But she emerged from her office as he entered the living room. In close-fitting gray dress and soft shoes, she moved quietly as smoke. Late sunlight poured through the window and burned along her blond hair.

"Where were you?" she asked. "I got so worried I stayed, just in case—"

"Around." He studied her, the trouble and the underlying pride. He wanted to tell her she was a beautiful structure, but decided not to. Possibly Culquhoun had used such a phrase to her. Once.

She went to him and laid a hand on his arm. The gesture was unconscious, but he held himself very still lest she take her hand back.

"I'm sorry about that thing last night," she said. "It must have been dreadful."

He started. "How'd you know?"

"A couple of reporters came here. They wanted to take pictures. When I found out, I went straight to a newsstand and— I'm so sorry, Mike. I know how you value those swords."
He tried, a little befuddled, to disentangle truth and fiction. The lie was what he had told the police, and the police reporter who interviewed him. Or was it really a falsehood? He had played down the murderous aspect; as officially recorded, the episode seemed only a burglary, with a thief who entered a door absent-mindedly left open and attacked in sheer panic when the householder whose bedroom he had been searching woke up. Now, standing among familiar unthreatening books, records, pictures, Stefanik found terror grown unreal. Surely he had dreamed it all! Or, at least, been in a hysterical condition, distorting the facts out of suppressed hostility toward the owner of this woman. Of course the version given the police was the true one. It had to be.

“You’re too silent, Mike. Something is wrong.”

He braced himself. “Yes.” Turning from her, he crammed fists deep into his pockets and stared out the window. The Bay was full of white fog, growing molten yellow as the sun declined.

“I had occasion to stop by the lab,” he said. “I saw Art. He wanted me to tell you he wouldn’t be home tonight. He didn’t say why.”

Then he waited.

After a time he heard her voice, unsure of itself. “Could I have a drink, Mike?”

“We could both stand one.” He went to his liquor cabinet and poured two hefty Scotches, straight. When he came back, Janice was sitting on the couch. She had wept a bit, but now her face was turned to the window. He joined her. They sat unspeaking for many minutes. The Bay became a crucible of gold. The Marin hills beyond were purple, joined to dim San Francisco towers by six Chinese brush strokes of bridge. Overhead, the western sky was a clear pale green.

At last she sighed. “If I only knew why, Mike.”

It was on his tongue to repeat what Linden had warned.
But that could mean the loss of her. He fought himself, thinking what a coward he was. She took another drink from her glass. Her words ran on, low and toneless, as if she had been hypnotized:

“I suppose our marriage was foredoomed. But it was so different at first. Did I ever tell you how we met? It was in April last year. I was at the University, a junior, but very much a country girl still. My vacations had all been spent up at the resort, you see, helping my parents. That’s just a little place; it doesn’t attract a sophisticated clientele. Here in Berkeley I’d gone in more for riding and sailing than—oh, dances— I was rather a greasy grind too, I’m afraid. But it did interest me, all I was learning. I thought I was getting terribly wise. Arthur was taking some advanced physics courses, part time. He saw me in a coffee shop, sat right down— No, it wasn’t a pickup. He wasn’t a cradle robber. He’s sixteen years older than me, after all. He just talked. But I went back to the dorm with the world wobbling around me. We started going out together. He didn’t hide anything from me, what he’d been through, how poor he was as a boy, his nervous breakdown, his divorce—and he didn’t brag it up either, the way a lot of people will. It was just a fact to him. But don’t you see, he’d beaten all that. Or so I thought. I began to understand all I’d been reading about heroes, what it meant. He was so much more than I that— Well, we were married in June. We went to Mexico for our honeymoon. I’d studied Spanish. But Arthur knew Mex. If you had seen him laughing with those people—I couldn’t understand what they were saying, but I had to laugh too. It was that kind of merriment.”

She stopped. Stefanik offered cigarettes. She refused. He lit his own, still wondering what to say to her. After a while she went on: “Thinking back, I see that it began to go downhill for us even then. We’d planned on a month. He was bored and restless in two weeks. We were home again in three. He threw
himself straight back into his work. Since then he's had less and less to do with me—he's cursed me, come home drunk, gone out of the house in a rage, more often each month. Till now—I don't know. What could I do? Keith's an angel. He told me to hang on, to wait it out. Roy and Nerissa Linden have helped. And you, Mike. Just having this job, something I was accomplishing—Oh, we've become friends again, Arthur and I. Sometimes for weeks on end. But that got to be more and more rare. I'm no Griselda, you understand. I've shouted back at him. I've gone out alone, with my old college pals, when he worked late night after night and I couldn't stand the house any longer, or when he just sat staring at the television, or— I tried, Mike. I kept thinking he'd recover and we'd get back what we had that springtime."

She stopped once more. Stefanik tried softly: "But now?"

Her head bent down. She closed a fist in her lap and said in an exhausted voice: "Now, I don't even know if I care to get it back."

The heart jumped in his breast.

He forced himself to ask her, "It's reached a peak in the past several weeks, hasn't it?"

"Yes. Like a fever-dream, sometimes. I might as well admit now, that bruise on my cheek last month wasn't caused by a fall."

"And you don't know why?"

"Keith says something in Arthur forces him to work himself into collapse, every few years. I think, though, what's made it so especially bad this time must be some—some outside chance. Maybe some trivial thing he's exaggerated till it's driving him out of all humanness. I've asked him and asked him what. But he won't tell me. Keith says that's always been part of Arthur's trouble. He can't unburden himself, he just locks his mouth till—"

_Till something explodes_, thought Stefanik. He felt a cold knot in his belly. _Till he commits murder?_
"What happened last night?" he queried.

"Arthur came home. We had supper. He was quiet, gloomy, but at least we weren't fighting. About eight-thirty or so, Greg Ionescu wandered in. I guess you haven't met him. He was a classmate of mine before I dropped out of college. A funny little boy. I like him. He'd visited us several times. Arthur sat watching TV while Greg and I talked. Without any warning, Arthur sprang up. He took Greg by the collar and frogmarched him out the door. I've never heard such vile language as he used. He told Greg never to come back. I started to holler myself, to say what I thought of his conduct. Arthur roared back. He grabbed his coat and left. He didn't return all night."

"Did you call the lab again today?"

Her chin lifted. "No. I've had enough."

And then she caught his hand between her own and cried aloud: "But Mike, it was so hard not to!"

They sat together while dusk flowed in through the window. Little was said. It was quite dark when Stefanik finally rose and turned on the light. "Come on," he told her. "We're going to dinner."

She blinked in the glare. "I can't do that."

"The hell you can't." He took her wrist and almost dragged her to her feet. "If ever anyone needed a proper meal and several drinks, her name is Janice F. X. Kingsley. We'll talk about everything except our troubles, and I'll decant you before twelve for what I suspect will be your first good night's sleep in a month."

She found a smile. It trembled, but she tucked her arm under his and they went out together.

He drove downhill and through back streets until they were at a restaurant in a shabby district near the yacht harbor. He wanted to please her, but there was an instinctive suspicion to overcome; unpretentiousness was needed. "I've never heard of this place," she said.

"Every so often," he replied, "someone comes triumphantly
to tell me they've Discovered a dinery: Kan's, Ernie's, Speng-
er's." Relaxed a little by now, she laughed. "But I really did
Discover this."

Inside, behind the counter, were shelves impossibly over-
loaded with ship models, conchs, stuffed fish, clamshells, steer-
ing gear, guns, Gibson girl calendars, beer steins, and vague
objects from indeterminate parts of the world. A freezer cabinet
offered shrimp to take home, fresh off the boat. The other
customers were of the so-called working class, rough clothes
and full wallets, except for one seedy schoolteacher. Stefanik
led Janice into a booth. "Large amounts of Tuborg," he in-
structed the waitress. "And then, I think, two regular dinners
with clam chowder and fried prawns."

"Really?" said Janice. "How Continental of you."
"Consider me twirling my evil black mustache," he said.
"You were born over there, didn't you tell me?"
"Yes, in Prague. Don't accept any of these art-colony imi-
tators: I am a genuine Bohemian, and any chess-playing lady
who marries me will be Czech-mated."

"Ouch!" Seriously: "How did you come here, then?"
"My father was a professor of linguistics. As such, he spent a
lot of time in Germany, and saw what was coming. We reached
the States in 1939. He got a position at the University of Min-
nesota, and I grew up in the Norsewest, among God's Frozen
People."

"Oh, stop clowning, Mike. I'm probing your past or your soul
or something. Is that how you came to your present work?"

"Indirectly. Our household was bilingual, and then of course
I picked up English. But Dad is an old-style academic dis-
ciplinarian. As soon as I showed a talent for languages, he
made me really learn some. By the time he'd enrolled me in
Harvard, I was fairly sick of it all, and I'm afraid my college
career was more booze than Muse."

"You wouldn't have gotten through Harvard if it were that
bad."
“Oh, I squeaked by. But I couldn’t see becoming a Herr Doktor. When I had my diploma, I asked to be drafted, partly to get it over with, partly to have time for decision. Someone in the Army classification system blundered, and I was actually assigned to GHQ in Paris as an interpreter. I’m a Korean War veteran who fought in the offices, in the cafés, on the Rue St. Germain. It wasn’t a bad time, and it calmed me some. Afterward I put in a couple of years at the Sorbonne on G.I. Came back in ’56 via the Far East. I’d visited the Bay Area before and liked it. Had also made some American connections in Paris, who had translating work for me to do. I set up in business, and that’s the whole sordid story to date.”

The beer came. He poured for her. “You’ve had fun,” she said. “I always wanted to travel.”

“I will again. So can you. Lift up your heart. Or, anyhow, bottoms up— I won’t say lift up your bottom, though.”

She laughed afresh and clinked glasses with him.

The meal paraded by, more for a couple of dollars than she could eat. Finally Stefanik said, “Now we bar hop.”

“I must get home,” she protested.

“You shall. At a later hour. En avant!”

The night air was cold and damp in their faces. Stefanik sent the MG skittering down many streets. They stopped at an Italian place for cappuccino, at a plush hotel bar for Scotch and soda, at a college beer joint for jazz. But they found more pleasure in talking than anything else.

Stefanik hadn’t felt so happy in a long time. He’d give Janice the warning Linden had given him—of course he would—but later, tomorrow perhaps, sometime soon. Tonight she needed anything but truth.

And the hours ran from him.

As they came out on the street again, about ten, she said, “Let’s wind up at the Howl.”

He lifted brows. “I thought you had more taste than to take the Beat Generation seriously.”
“Oh, no. Never before have so many been so mediocre so loudly. But the bar is kind of fun.”

“True. I drop in myself, now and then.”

“Fooey! I was hoping to guide you for a change. Is there any tavern in the Eastbay you don’t know?”

“Much have I traveled in the realms of Goldwasser. I warn you, though, if they’re playing folk music I won’t stay. I refuse to pretend I’m a deckhand tramping around the capstan singing *Heave-ho, urp, the binnacle has barnacles*, when I know damn well he’d have used a steam winch if he’d had one.”

“Shh! Don’t let anybody hear you. All the nonconformists listen to folk music.”

The Howl stood among darkened shops on San Pablo Avenue. No neon marked it. Stefanik led Janice through a door currently placarded *Vita brevis, Sartre longus*. Inside was a single room, full of tables lit by candles stuck in the usual wax-crusted wine bottles. Paintings by some local artist were on rather blobby exhibit. A rack at the rear held copies of *The Miscellaneous Man, On the Road*, and other fare for browsers with cat eyes. Behind the tiny bar, banjos, guitars, and bongo drums were available; a hi-fi was playing something Mexican. At this comparatively early hour, there weren’t many customers. A thin young man with glasses sat insisting to the collegiate-looking bartender that by God, Schwartz was more of a goddam’ poet than any ten goddam’ Ferlinghettis rolled into one big goddam’ ball of wax. Stefanik overheard a man tell a woman at a table that if Eisenhower didn’t exist it would have been necessary for General Motors to invent him.

He went up to the bar. “Hi, Joe,” he said. It occurred to him that he had no idea of Joe’s last name. “Demi of Bordeaux.”

The bartender opened the bottle, continuing to his patron: “No, now you look here, take that line in Ferlinghetti, you know the one I mean, the one that starts—”

“Janice, lass!”
Stefanik brought the flask, two glasses, and a scowl to the table where she sat. A very young man with dark pudgy features, feeble beard, and grubby fingernails had joined her. She threw Stefanik a wry glance. "This is Greg Ionescu," she said.

They shook hands as she finished the introduction. Stefanik sat down. "I really am sorry about last night, Greg," said Janice. "My husband wasn't feeling good and—"

"Ah, forget it. De nada, like they say in May-hee-co. I'll put it into my novel, never fear." Ionescu cocked his head at Stefanik. "Say, I'm flat. Not a sou. Mind if I get a glass and help myself? I'll do the same for you when my Nobel Prize comes in. Thanks. I Shall Return." He bustled off.

"Kyrie eleison," muttered Stefanik.

"Oh, Greg's not so bad when you get to know him," said Janice. "I'll admit he can only be taken in small doses, but—"

Ionescu came back and drank deep. "Ahhh! You saved my life," he said. "Really you did. We Slavs ought to stick together, oughtn't we? I grew up in Petaluma as Johnson. Can you imagine how delighted I was to find that my grandfather had changed from Ionescu when he came over? Christ, Petaluma is dry. Sun, dust, and chickens. It gave me a permanent thirst."

"What do you do for a living?" asked Stefanik.

"As little as possible. Can't write without something to write about. What have I got? A goddam' college degree. I'm grateful to Art, Janice. I really am. He's a bastard and I don't know why you continue the farce, but he gave me an experi—"

She rose. Her lips shivered. "That's enough," she said. "Let's go, Mike."

"Hey!". Ionescu's mouth fell open. "I didn't mean— Look, you cats, if he knows too, why should you—"

Stefanik led Janice out. Ionescu shrugged and poured himself some more wine.
The girl didn’t speak until they were in the car. Then she fumbled in her purse for a handkerchief. “Take me home, please,” she asked humbly.

Stefanik ground gears. The MG jumped from the curb. Janice wiped her eyes. The wind tossed her short fair locks. “I’m sorry.” It was a genuine contrition. “This evening was so wonderful. I didn’t think I’d spoil it for you like this.”

“You haven’t,” he answered without tone.

Bleak, she said: “I suppose I should do the sensible thing about Arthur. Write him off. Start all over. But I can’t, Mike. He’s—I don’t know—helpless? He meant the world to me once. It seems like a hundred years ago. I can’t just abandon him. It isn’t his fault, really. He’s not well.”

Stefanik’s jaws clamped together. “Personal responsibility has to begin somewhere,” he said. “I don’t believe nerves are an excuse. Nor Society, nor anything short of organic brain damage.”

“That’s easy to say. It’s not so easy to live by.”

He remembered what he had not yet found the courage to tell her, and fell silent.

Her house was on Virginia Street near Acton, a middle-class district. It crouched lightless in a yard full of night. He walked around and opened the car door for her. Her hands lingered in his; a street lamp touched her up tilted face with paleness.

Unease fluttered through him. “Are you sure you should be here alone?” he asked. Hurriedly: “I mean, if you stayed over night with some family you know—”

“I’ll be okay.” As if against her own will, she reached up and stroked his cheek. “Thanks ever so much, Mike. I wish—Oh, hell, Mike, good night.” She turned and went quickly from him, up the porch steps.

He drove home through thunder.

At the foot of his lane, he parked. It ran upward beneath
overarching leaves, like a tunnel. He knew it well enough not to need a flashlight. He started climbing.

What am I going to do? he thought. What do I even want to do?

His feet rattled loud on stone. Once he brushed a low bough. The leaves hissed. He stopped, peering into gloom as if he could make out his own roof ahead.

Another foot sounded above him. He heard a voice, barely audible: "Is that you, Stefanik?"

For no good reason, his heart vibrated. He must try twice before he could answer: "Yes. Who's there?"

Shoes clacked. He reached out, blind. Another hand touched his. Then the blade whistled.

Stefanik did not feel it slash his left arm. It was too sharp. He jumped backward, heard a hoarse oath and again the buzz of the sword. He stumbled, lost his footing, and rolled down the stair.

At the bottom, he picked himself up and staggered out on the sidewalk. It stretched away, hard and bare as the moon, under wide-spaced lamps. Blood runneled from his wound to the concrete. He heard the hunter groping down through blackness.

The MG stood by him. He yanked back the canvas cover he had snapped on. It didn't occur to him to shout. The blade would rip him open before any cry could rouse a neighbor. He vaulted over the side, into the bucket seat. He had no memory of pulling forth his key, but the lock turned as the sword came out of the lane.

It was the one forged by Senzo Muramasa, who had borne devils in his head. At that moment, Stefanik's eyes would register no more than its blue-white curve. It seemed to catch what light there was and blaze. The edge dripped wet. Behind it, shadowed, Stefanik thought there was a hunched big
shape. He stamped on clutch and gas. The motor, still warm, burst to life. As the sword left the dark and shrieked after him, Stefanik pulled away. He rounded the next corner on two wheels. Only then did he have time to begin understanding what had happened.
The door marked Trygve Yamamura, Private Investigator was on a second floor in downtown Berkeley, above a drugstore. The office beyond was not large. The staff consisted of Yamamura and a stunning Chinese girl. She was nothing but a secretary: he was much too interested in his small round wife and his five small round children to waste time elsewhere. Furthermore, he had a degree in criminology; took pains to stay on good terms with the city police, of which he had formerly been a member; drank little; carried no gun; and had not killed a man since Army days.

Morning sunlight outlined the smoke of his pipe as he listened to Stefanik. He sat back, eyes half closed, long legs crossed, and made few interruptions. He had seen a newspaper account of the episode Monday night, but been too busy to get in touch with his friend. Now he asked that the tale be repeated. When the sword was first mentioned, he inquired softly: "The Muramasa, wasn't it?"

"Yes." Stefanik felt surprised. "The papers didn't say anything about that. How do you know?"

"It would be," said Yamamura. "Go on."

The story finished, he nodded at the other man's left forearm, bandaged in a sling. "You took that to the hospital, I suppose?"
“Yes,” Stefanik answered. “Fifteen stitches. I told them it was an accident. Then I checked into a motel. My place hadn’t been disturbed when I returned this morning, though."

“You think it was the Culquhoun guy.”

Stefanik nodded miserably. “I can’t imagine who else. Once could have been a chance criminal, but last night he was waiting, and called my name.”

“This is a police matter.”

“I told you, Trig, if it’s at all possible I want to keep the police out. There are—are friends involved. Couldn’t you handle it, somehow?”

Yamamura puffed in silence for a while. The Chinese girl’s fingers relaxed on her stenotype. The rushing noise of traffic drifted through open windows.

“I’ll try,” said Yamamura at last. “I’ve a couple of other jobs on hand. I can’t give this one full time, but if you want, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks, Trig.” Stefanik’s words were shaky.

“You may not be so grateful when you get my bill.” Yamamura laid down his pipe and leaned forward, thick-muscled arms folded on the desk. “I can’t promise not to inform the police, you realize. That sword must have sent many men down hell-road, in six hundred years. I don’t want to risk feeding it again.”

“Well—yes—I understand. If you absolutely must.”

“We’ll see what I turn up. Now let’s get a little background. Isn’t this Culquhoun an associate of Oswaldo Pereira?”

“Yes. Keith Deacon and he own the D & C lab, which I understand Pereira has an interest in.”

“I’ll check that. What does the lab do, anyhow?”

“Metallurgic research.” Stefanik began to talk at a headlong rate, as if staving off something. “In the past decade or so metallurgy has made fantastic progress. New concepts, new techniques: it’s analogous to the way nuclear physics and bio-
chemistry have blossomed. The time isn’t too far distant when you’ll specify the properties you want in a metal and some engineer will design an alloy for you. Right now, of course, there’s still a lot that isn’t known, a great deal which has to be worked out by empirical methods. That’s what D & C does. Partly it solves problems handed it by other outfits which don’t have facilities for such specialized research. Partly it carries out independent investigation, with an eye to discovering something patentable and profitable.”

“I see. Is it a very big concern?”

“N-no. So much capital is tied up in expensive equipment. I don’t imagine either partner personally makes more than ten or fifteen thousand a year. But it has a tremendous growth potential. Especially if one current project pans out: then both can expect to become millionaires.”

“Hm. Now how do you come into all this?”

“Last fall they needed some unpublished scientific papers translated from Slovakian. Since Oswaldo already knew me through the club, he suggested me for the task. In the course of conferences and so on, I got rather friendly with Deacon. And with Culquhoun, insofar as that was possible. His wife wanted a job. Not for money, she had enough, but—well, never mind.”

“Oh, but I do mind,” said Yamamura. “I have to probe motives, and I know how that hurts. Get it over with.”

Stefanik looked at the floor. “Her home life was already starting to go to pieces,” he mumbled. “She’d tried to finish college, but under such circumstances found it impossible to study and dropped out again. That gave her a still deeper sense of failure, and— Anyhow, when she heard me mention I needed an assistant, she asked for the position. By now I’d hate to do without her.”

Yamamura glanced past drooping lids. “It is strictly business between you two, isn’t it?”
Stefanik reddened. "Yes!" Floudering: "Naturally, we've become pretty good friends. I'm trying to spare her. That's why I've come to you instead of—"

"Okay, enough." Seeking impersonality, Yamamura asked, "What were those papers you translated?"

"I promised to keep it confidential."

"You will. I'd soon be out of customers if I ever blabbed. I'm trying to understand your situation as a whole. Anything secret had better be dredged up at the outset."

"Well—all right." Stefanik looked out the window. As he talked, his voice grew calmer and he relaxed visibly. "There was this physicist in Czechoslovakia, Josef Tomek, an old man, and out of favor with the government. So he lived an isolated life, working on some theories of his own, apparently not discussing them with any colleague. At last the Communists arrested him, and he died in prison. His son Edouard escaped to the West, and now lives in Paris. Edouard took along old Josef's notes, in the hope they might have some value. As he's an M.D. himself, he didn't understand very much of them.

"Culquhoun had already published some work which attracted international notice. The man is a genius in his own field, damn him. Edouard Tomek asked around in Paris if anyone could make anything of his father’s notes. I gather that the vague description he gave to some French scientist conveyed enough for the Frenchman to suggest writing Culquhoun. Culquhoun’s own research had embodied some of the ideas that Josef Tomek developed more fully. So Edouard, writing very bad French which Janice translated, got into correspondence, and eventually sent the papers for whatever Culquhoun could do with them. Since his work was still in a preliminary stage, Josef had written in his mother tongue, Slovakian; he’d have published in French, German, or Russian, of course. So I was called in. The notes were badly jumbled, full of weird private abbreviations. Deacon, Culquhoun, and
I had a lot of sessions, applying our different special knowledges to making sense out of it all. That's how I got so well acquainted with all concerned. Finally, we had the outline of a theory which does definitely have revolutionary implications. I don't pretend to more than a superficial comprehension of it, but Culquhoun was excited." Stefanik's mouth bent downward. "From then on, he neglected his wife even worse than before."

"What is this idea?" asked Yamamura quickly.

"Do you know what whiskers are? I mean in technology. They're filaments which grow on metals or ores under certain conditions: from supersaturation, by reduction or precipitation of salts. They have a lot of interesting properties, including fantastic strength for their size. Iron whiskers, for instance, have up to a thousand times the tensile strength of piano wire. It seems to result from near-perfect crystallization. You see, the weakness of metals is largely caused by their lattices being nonhomogeneous and imperfect. A flawlessly crystallized alloy might well be a hundred times as strong as the best steel, and highly corrosion-resistant to boot."

"I follow you so far."

"Tomek was developing a quantum theory of crystallization, based on recent data gotten from the study of whiskers. It led to his sketching out a way by which it might be controlled with precision. Don't ask me to explain the ins and outs. I can't. The process involves radionic annealing under high pressure, and using the electronic properties of perfect crystals in a feedback circuit to build up the alloy layer by layer. In a way, it's almost a modern version of the old Japanese sword-making technique: you know, folding the same bar of steel over and over, and beating it flat each time. I've seen a few of Culquhoun's experimental ingots, and they do show grain, just like a good blade—" Stefanik broke off. "What's wrong?"

Yamamura suppressed his grimace. "Swords again." He
shook himself a little. "So Culquhoun's developing something, the patent on which may be worth a lot of money. Very interesting. I imagine the secrecy is so that some big corporation won't get wind of it and beat out D & C with more elaborate facilities."

"Yes. Keith Deacon has made himself a virtual security officer. He's even fobbing off Edouard Tomek for the time being, with noncommittal phrases like 'intriguing, but a great deal of work required.' Actually, I have the impression Culquhoun's finished the basic research and isn't too far from a patentable industrial-process prototype. However, no one over here knows Tomek personally; he may be a chronic blabber-mouth." Stefanik brought a fist down on the arm of his chair. "But what am I going into all this for?" he cried. "Culquhoun—or somebody—wants to kill me!"

"You never know what's going to be relevant," said Yamamura in a mild voice. "However, enough background for the time being. Tell me what you know of Culquhoun's recent behavior, his movements and above all why he should hate you."

Stefanik obeyed, awkwardly.

At the end, he looked up. The hardness of Yamamura's gaze shocked him.

"Holy hopping heaven," whispered the detective. "Do you mean to say there's a man with a sword, jealous to the point of homicide, and you've left his wife alone with him?"

"I—I'm not certain, you know—"

"You're certain enough to come here, aren't you?"

"He wasn't home again last night."

"He could have come home." Yamamura knocked the dottle from his pipe and put it back in his mouth. The muscles in his jaws stood forth as he bit on the stem. He said like gunfire:

"She's still asleep, isn't she? At home, anyway? Your working day hasn't commenced yet. Well, get to her place. Camp on the doorstep. Take her where you will when she wakes up."
Use whatever means are necessary. But keep her away from that house!"

"Where—what—"

"She's got friends to stay with, I suppose. Or a hotel. Yeh, that would be better. Her husband might find her otherwise. He's made some crude attempts at being careful so far. If, of course, it really is him, if he really is that wild. But these unstable personalities can go over the cliff at any instant. Take that girl out of his reach!"

Stefanik wet his lips. He stood up, a quick ill-coordinated movement. "Yes," he said.

"I'll see brother Culquhoun later today," went on Yamamura. "Call me this evening and I'll give you an opinion. Oh, another thing: your enemy has a key to your apartment. Put a bolt inside that door. Today."

"God, yes," exclaimed Stefanik.

He went out, almost running. Yamamura leaned back, relighting his pipe, easing his body muscle by muscle. Tension was ruinous to thought.

The Chinese girl put her stenotype away. "It sounds pretty straightforward," she remarked.

Yamamura shook his head. "It would," he answered, "but there's that damned sword. I think I mean damned quite literally."

She saw he wanted to talk, and sat down. He fumed smoke for a while. Then, slowly, staring out at the sky:

"Call it superstition if you want to, Mei. But a thing is never simply itself. It means something. In the old days they'd have spoken of a demon forged into the steel. Now it would be fashionable to call it psychosomatics, associational suggestion, or what have you. We substitute one incantation for another, but how much have we really understood?"

"You see, the Japanese sword was always more than a weapon, just as judo is more than a sport. It expressed a whole
culture. The smith was expected to lead a religious, austere life. Before starting work on a blade, he bathed, put a yebo shi
on his head—the lacquered cap—and stretched a straw rope
across his door with gohei hanging from it to keep evil spirits
away and invite good ones in. Then he offered prayers, and
only then did he begin work.

"Senzo Muramasa was an exception. He was a great smith,
but he was mad."

"Six hundred years ago, was it?" she murmured deprecatingly.

"I'm not merely reciting tradition," said Yamamura. "Though
Lord knows that in the course of generations, the famous
swords seemed to acquire personalities. There was the Taka-
no-su of Munechika. It was found in a hawk's nest once, and
the custom arose of putting it in the nest of any young hawk
taken for training, so the bird would develop keenness. There
were the Kogarasu Maru, the Little Crow, and the Nukemara,
the Springer Out, said to leap from its scabbard—like that
Hungarian story about the sword of Helena the Witch. Those
two belonged to the Taira clan, but Tademori divided them
among two sons by different mothers. It led to a feud, where
one son sided with the Minamoto; so the power of the Taira
was broken at the battle of Dannoura, and they were almost
annihilated. That was the battle where a sword by Sukekane
slashed an armored soldier in two. The Minamoto themselves
had several heirloom blades. Higekiri, the Beard Cutter, took
off a man's head and went through his beard before the head
fell. Hizamaru, the Knee Cutter, decapitated a kneeling crimi-
nal and chopped his knees in the same downward sweep. You
understand, a lot of these weapons were tested on corpses, or
even on live men. A blade which would cut through three
bodies at one stroke was considered pretty good."

The girl winced. "Pleasant people," she said.

"Yeh," grunted Yamamura. "Nowadays we're civilized: we
fry small children with firebombs. Actually, most swords had honorable reputations. Yoshimitsu blades were thought to be especially friendly to the Tokugawa family, for instance. When Ieyasu was beaten at Ichi-no-tani, and tried to commit hara-kiri with a Yoshimitsu *tanto*, it wouldn’t cut him, they say, though it did go right through a druggist’s mortar nearby. His friends arrived in time to stop the suicide, and Ieyasu went on to establish the Shogunate. But Muramasa swords, on the other hand, were believed to be unlucky for that clan. Ieyasu once cut himself examining a blade, and said right away it must be a Muramasa, which turned out to be correct.”

“But after all, Trig—”

“Muramasa swords didn’t just hate the Tokugawas, though. They were enemies of the whole human race. They were supposed to hunger for blood, and make their wearers commit murder or suicide. If they’d once killed a man, the owner would starve to death unless he fed his sword with more blood.” Yamamura shrugged. “Okay, I know that sort of legend is universal. I remember when I was in Norway, even, reading about Tyrfling, that always killed when it was drawn, and always ended with destroying its owner, and was brought back from the grave to finish wiping out one family. And there are Malays who nick their thumbs deliberately, any time they draw a *kris*, just to satisfy its wish for blood in a safe way. Sure. All myth.

“But it’s a fact that Honami Kotoku, who was a sober official sword expert and wrote one of the early books on the subject, wouldn’t list Muramasa as a master smith, in spite of the blades’ quality: he called them ignoble and murderous. It’s a fact that Muramasa swords were never worn since Tokugawa times. It’s a fact that Prince Ito had one in his luggage when he was assassinated.”

Yamamura stood up. “And it’s a fact,” he concluded, “that a would-be murderer is here and now in possession of one.”
The first thing to do was call Pereira. Yamamura got through to the financier’s office in San Francisco. “I have a problem, Oswaldo,” he began. “I’d better not say exactly what it is. But would you mind answering some questions about the D & C outfit?”

“Go ahead.” The other voice took on an unaccustomed hardness. “Just tell me, does it involve Arthur Culquhoun?”

“Well, yes. Unless my client is badly mistaken.”

“I doubt that. Culquhoun is not a pleasant man.”

“What do you have against him?”

“I’ll relate it in confidence, Trig. Two years ago, D & C had bright prospects, if it could raise enough capital for up-to-date equipment and so on. I already knew Keith Deacon; he approached me. I came in as a silent partner, sinking quite a bit of money into the firm. We drew up an odd agreement, though: I could be removed at any time within the first five years, merely getting back my investment plus interest. Culquhoun insisted on that. I didn’t like it, but yielded. After all, he didn’t know me, I might try to meddle or whatever. Actually, of course, I kept hands off.

“Now they’re developing something of tremendous promise. I don’t know what, except the vague statement that it’s a new tempering process and that the physics is over my head. Well, I’m no mathematician, I admit, but I resent being told to run
along and play. What’s even worse, though, is that if the re-
search does pan out, I’m going to be fired. After making it
possible for them to do this, I’ll get 5 per cent on my money
as a sop. It could have been earning twice that!” Pereira
softened his tone again. “For once the cliché is true—it isn’t
the money but the principle. Cheapness like that revolts me
physically.”
“A nasty little trick,” agreed Yamamura. “But are you sure
it is being planned?”
“Deacon has intimated it to me. He himself is most unhappy
about it. The idea is Culquhoun’s. Deacon will fight for me,
but in the long run, what can he do? The enterprise is built
around Culquhoun, you know. The man is undoubtedly a titan.
And charming when he cares to be—which has not been very
often in the past few months. A scientific genius and an emo-
tional imbecile. But when he insists on something, Deacon has
to yield. If Culquhoun walked out, the firm would at best turn
into one of those drab half-a-lung affairs that barely keep their
owner in the middle class.”
“Unless Deacon can find someone equally good.”
“Well, the senior engineer, Roy Linden, has considerable
gifts. He might in time develop into another Culquhoun. But
he needs a freer hand. He’s been eager for a voice in policy.
It isn’t so much a raise he wants, I think, as a chance to do his
own unhamppered research on any questions that happen to
interest him. Right now, he only works on problems that inter-
est D & C’s clients. I myself think the change would be a good
idea, and Deacon is favorable. But so far Culquhoun—again!
—has vetoed it. I don’t think Culquhoun wants an intellectual
rival.” Pereira cleared his throat. “Pardon. My emotions have
run away with me. I’d better stop rambling.”
“On the contrary,” said Yamamura, “I hope you’ll continue
to ramble. I need background. Uh, let’s see, when was the
lab started?”

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“Oh, many years ago, by Deacon’s father. They’re one of the old, wealthy California families, d’you know. Or, rather, they were. The 1929 crash hit them hard. They couldn’t bear to stop being rich. All through the depression, they sold first this holding and then that, to maintain their scale of living. Finally only the laboratory was left, and when the old man died, back around 1944, it went downhill fast. Suddenly Keith found himself among the newly poor. He had had it plush all his life. Even in the war, he got a Navy commission and a good Washington public-relations assignment, just because he was a Deacon of Oakland. He tried hard to recover, took a minor executive position with some firm back East, married money; but my connections tell me his progress was slow and he was obviously only going to go so far and then stop. Finally he quit, came back here, and tried to put some life into this dying business he had inherited. The Korean War gave it a minor boost. But it would have withered again, I’m sure, except that in 1953 Deacon was bold and imaginative enough to pick Culquhoun off Skid Row, dry him out, and make him a partner in a completely reorganized outfit. Since then it’s been going places. Now Deacon lives in Piedmont and supports his mother comfortably in the old Oakland homestead. If this Tomek-process research pays off, the Deacons will once again be a tribe of millionaires.”

“Hm-m. What’s Culquhoun’s story?”

“Los Angeles born. Depression child, with a grim sort of home to boot. I have an idea young Arthur must have succumbed to temptation in the Mexican quarter now and then—you know what Main Street was like in those days—and suffered remorse afterward as only a Scotch Presbyterian can suffer. He’s much too loud an atheist not to have been thoroughly religious once. He worked as a boy to help keep the family going, and he worked as a young man to put himself through college, and he graduated straight into the wartime
economy and worked himself to collapse. When he got over that, he was drafted into the postwar Army, a dreary enough experience for anyone. After discharge, he went back to work for an Oakland company. He married in—let me see—1949. It broke up in '53. I did some checking before making my investment, naturally, and his wife's charges of cruelty seem to have been well founded. She took the kids East. He went on this prolonged binge. What it really amounted to was a second nervous breakdown. Deacon rescued him, as I told you. I've never known anyone with Deacon's gift for understanding people, for quietly arranging matters so they'll do as he thinks best. But now, when Culquhoun is headed down the hill once more, there's not much that even Deacon can accomplish, except stand ready to pick up the pieces."

"I suppose one ought to feel sorry for Culquhoun," said Yamamura. His thoughts ran on: That's the modern attitude. Poor fellow, he can't help what he's doing; let's be kind to this pathetic murderer, thief, swindler, rapist. Myself, though I know it's hopelessly old-fashioned, I'll keep my sympathy for the victim. Aloud: "I realize you don't like talking this way about any man. But do you believe Culquhoun might actually commit homicide?"

Stillness hummed in the telephone. At last Pereira said, "I take it he's found out about Michael Stefanik and his wife."

"What? Wait a minute! Are you implying an affair between Mike and Mrs. Culquhoun?"

"Why—well, yes. Yes."

"How do you know?"

"Everybody knows it, Trig. And I can't really blame them, can you?"

"I didn't ask you what everybody knows. I want the source of your information."

"Good Lord, where does common gossip come from? Let me think a minute. . . . Yes, it was mentioned to me, just in-
cidentally, by Roy Linden's assistant, one day when I was over there. And also by a mutual acquaintance of mine and the two partners at the country club. I don't hand on such stories myself, so I haven't buttonholed anyone or—Well, I hadn't given it much thought, Trig. I wasn't particularly interested. Looking at it critically, I suppose it is only one of those rumors."

"Which Mike himself denies," said Yamamura. "Wait, I remember now. You made an oblique reference to it at the meeting Sunday night, didn't you? And he was completely bemused. Didn't get your meaning at all. I know Mike fairly well. He isn't any kind of actor. He really had no idea."

"I'll be damned." After a stiff minute: "I wish I could apologize to the lady."

"Since she never knew either, it seems unnecessary." Yamamura smiled with scant mirth. "Okay, Oswaldo, that gives me enough to start on. Much obliged."

"Be careful," said Pereira. "Culquhoun has an ugly soul." He said goodbye in a distressed voice and hung up.

Yamamura put what he had learned into his mind to simmer and went out of the office. He had other business on hand, a skip-tracing job. His inquiries consumed the morning. He ate lunch at a smörgåsbord house and lingered over a glass of steam beer, relaxing body and brain as a cat relaxes. About one-thirty he decided it was time to visit D & C. He laid no plans while his Volkswagen slipped through freeway traffic. The teaching of the judo school encourages a man to be passive, to expect nothing: then, if he is trained, he can react to whatever does come with such speed that he makes himself part of the total process.

He parked behind the lab and strolled around the block, observing. He entered the main door and was at once in the middle of sorcery, a wide room where lights flickered on control panels and men fed huge machines. For some while he stood watching, a lanky man in soft shoes, slacks, rainbow
sports shirt. When he stopped an employee, his procedure came to him. "Where can I find Mr. Linden, please?" he asked.

He was directed upstairs. Linden was at one of the benches, immersing an alloy strip in a glass-walled box filled by an acid bath. He identified himself in response to Yamamura's question. "What can I do for you?" he added.

The detective studied the fleshless swarthy face. It had a look of moodiness and little sleep. Linden was a man under strain, he thought. "Can we talk privately a minute?"

"Okay." Linden led the way into his office, removed a stack of technical journals from the extra chair, and jackknifed himself down behind the desk. He glanced at Yamamura's wallet identification. "Private eye yet! Well, what do you want to find out?"

"I'm not sure." Yamamura let his muscles flow into the contours of the seat. "I'm trying to prevent—uh—possible discord. There's been gossip about Arthur Culquhoun's wife. Oswaldo Pereira suggested you might know something of the facts."

"Hm." Linden rubbed his chin. "Yeah, I guess my assistant did mention it to him. I'd been hearin' it around the shop—you know the way those stories circulate. But I never believed it myself. She's a fine girl, deserved better than she got. I slapped my assistant down hard when I learned he'd been passin' the story on." He raised eyes which were troubled behind the glasses. "Frankly, I've been worried about what might happen if Culquhoun heard. In fact, I guess probably he has gotten hints. That might account for his behavior lately." His smile was lopsided. "But what can I do? Go up an' say, 'Look, Art, your wife is faithful'? Uh-uh!"

"How did those yarns ever get started?"

Linden raised his shoulders and spread his palms. "Search me, Mac. 'Course, she does work in Mr. Stefanik's home, but
hell, a woman who was goin' to cheat wouldn't need that!” Bitterness tinged him. “Once people get to believin’ somethin’, though, about an individual or a group, the truth hasn’t got a chance.”

“How well I know.” Yamamura paused. “Do you think Culquhoun might—um—do something he would regret later?”

“I don’t think he’d regret it,” snapped Linden. Then, abruptly and roughly: “Forget I said that. I’m prejudiced.”

“If it helps head off violence,” said Yamamura, “a little back-biting seems justified. Well, I won’t bother you any more for now.”

“If you got some further questions, better ask me right away. I won’t be at work tomorrow or Friday.” At Yamamura’s glance of inquiry, Linden barked: “Private business!”

“Okay. Thanks, but there’s nothing.” The detective stood up. “Except by the way, just out of curiosity, where are you from?”

“I was an engineer down in L.A. before takin’ this job,” said Linden. “Before that, I studied at Wisconsin an’ Columbia.”

“You have an interesting accent.”

“Oklahoma originally. Part Cherokee.” Linden grinned. “Like Will Rogers said, my ancestors didn’t come over on the Mayflower, but they met the boat.”

“Oh? Oh, yes.” Yamamura opened the door. “I see. Well, glad to have met you.”

“If I can help you-all in any way, be sure and let me know,” said Linden. “I really do like Janice Culquhoun.”

But not her husband, added Yamamura. Does anybody? Keith Deacon—perhaps!

He crossed the corner of the chamber, to the secretary’s office, and asked to see the senior partner. She hesitated: “He never likes to be disturbed.” Yamamura insisted, and she surrendered. “A gentleman says he has to urgent you, Mr.
Deacon,” she called into the desk communicator. A high, amiable voice replied, “Send him in.”

Yamamura went through to the cluttered office beyond. Deacon acknowledged his self-introduction with a welcoming handshake. “I’ve heard of you,” he said. “And aren’t you also the mainstay of that samurai sword club? Mike Stefanik has been urging me to join. He showed me his collection. I must admit those blades are beautiful things.”

Yamamura sat down. “Mike says he’s told you how one of them was stolen, and he nearly got killed.”

“Yes. A nasty affair.” Deacon extended a cigarette box. Yamamura tamped his pipe instead. “Are you trying to trace the sword?”

“And prevent its actually murdering him. There was another attempt last night. Same weapon, same man.” Yamamura watched the smooth mobile face. It drew into an appalled expression.

“But that’s dreadful!” exclaimed Deacon. “What happened?”

Yamamura sketched it. He finished flatly, “Mike believes your partner Culquhoun was responsible.”

“What? No, wait. It can’t be!”

“Vas you dere, Sharlie?”

“What? Oh. Oh, you mean can I alibi him.” Deacon wiped his hairless brow with a handkerchief. “No. I’m afraid not. I was—last night—yes, I was at a bridge party. The Roger van Tynes’. It broke up pretty late.”

Yamamura made a mental note to check that claim, though he felt sure it was genuine enough. “Do you know where Culquhoun was, then?” he persisted. “He was not at home all night.”

“Oh? Well, he may have stayed at a hotel. It—hasn’t been so good, his home life. I’m afraid the marriage is on the point of breakup. But he hasn’t said much about it.”
“He may have decided to do something instead.”

“Now, wait,” objected Deacon. “I don’t believe that. Not of Art. What other enemies does Mike have?”

“None that I know of. Anyhow, I have to start investigating somewhere. Tell me, do you believe those stories about Culquhoun’s wife?”

“And Mike? I honestly don’t know. It would be understandable, if true: youth, proximity, compatibility, mutual interests. It’s a terrible shame that they didn’t meet and marry before Art ever came into the picture. Everyone concerned would have been so much happier.”

“Happens the yarns are false,” said Yamamura rather coldly. “Did you peddle them?”

He was trying to needle Deacon, whom he could see returning to bland self-possession. But the other man only shook his head. “No. At one point, I went out of my way to deny them. That was when the subject first came up, as gossip will—weeks ago. True or not, I didn’t see what anyone would gain by the tale being spread around. Evidently, though, I was unsuccessful in spiking it.”

“Nice of you to try,” said Yamamura. “Well, I want to speak to Culquhoun, and then I’ll stop pestering for a while.”

Deacon frowned. “I’m not sure that’s wise, Mr. Yamamura. He’s in a pretty bad state. He might blow up.”

“Would you rather have it done by a police officer?”

Deacon gave in. “All right, you win,” he sighed. “Better call him in here. I know him well enough so that I might be able to soothe him if he gets too angry.” He flipped the intercom switch. “Send Art to me, please, Doris. Tell him it’s important.”

Yamamura streamed smoke from his nose and waited. Deacon regarded him. “Did you ever spend much time in Japan?” he asked.

“Why—yes. A while as a kid, before the war. And then again after the war, with Army Intelligence. How do you know?”
“Your name suggested the possibility. And the way you sit there, so much at ease, is very Oriental.” Deacon smiled. “I imagine you wish the pseudointellectuals would get off this Zen Buddhism kick so the precepts could again be practiced seriously.”

“Uh!” said Yamamura, surprised. “Everybody calls you a judge of character. Now I believe ’em.” He frowned at the pipe bowl in his hand. “But then why do you credit those slanders on Mrs. Culquhoun?”

“I’m not infallible,” said Deacon. “And all I admitted was, I can’t be certain of the truth in that case.”

The door opened. Arthur Culquhoun filled it with his shoulders. He came through, closing it behind him, and gave Yamamura an antagonistic look. His appearance was unpleasantly seedy, and his eyes held a dry burning. “Well?” he said.

“This is Trygve Yamamura,” said Deacon. Astonishingly for an Anglo-Saxon, he avoided pronouncing it Trigvee. Culquhoun didn’t offer to shake hands as the detective laid down his pipe and rose. Deacon smiled in a nervous way from behind his desk. “He’s a kind of—of emissary, Art.”

Yamamura gauged his man. “Never mind euphemisms,” he said. “I’m a private investigator. Michael Stefanik wants me to find his stolen sword and whoever’s been trying to kill him with it.”

“So?” said Culquhoun.

“The sword is valuable enough to make its theft grand larceny,” said Yamamura. “Attempted murder is a serious crime in itself. Successful murder, in this state, means the gas chamber, which is about as sadistic as burning at the stake. We don’t want to bring the police into this if we can help it; but if we must, then matters will be out of our hands. And Berkeley cops are damned efficient.”

A nervous tic started in Culquhoun’s ill-shaven cheek. “Are you accusing me of anything?” he bristled.
“No,” said Yamamura. He locked eyes with the big man and held his gaze steady. “I’m conveying a message,” he went on in his gentlest tone. “Your wife will not be home tonight. That’s my own doing, to protect both of you. I want to say further that anything you may have heard, detrimental to her, is false. I’m prepared to dig into the case and prove that, if you want. As for the missing sword, if it were left—say—in Stefanik’s doorway one night, wrapped up well against the damp, he wouldn’t ask any further questions.”

Culquhoun knotted immense fists. Sweat gleamed on his skin. “Christ!” he gasped. “I don’t—I can’t—”

“I’ve never believed that killing solves anything,” said Yamamura. “At least, it won’t restore the loss that made the killer strike out. Better to start afresh, don’t you think?” He stood a minute longer, totally quiet. And then he saw the first sagging of Culquhoun’s body, and nodded to himself.

“Enough for now,” he said. “I’ll be on my way.”

“You might thank the man, Art,” said Deacon. “He really does think you need help.”

Culquhoun grew rigid. Blood flew into his face.

“You yellow-bellied keyhole peeper!” The window seemed to rattle with his roar.

Yamamura saw the fist draw back and hurtle straight for his jaw. He flicked aside. Culquhoun’s momentum brought the scientist crashing against him. Culquhoun bawled an obscenity and threw his arms around Yamamura.

The detective felt ribs creak. He put a forefinger at the base of the thick throat, and pushed. Culquhoun gasped with pain, released him and fell back. Yamamura closed in, seized Culquhoun’s right lapel in both hands and squeezed the throat between his wrists. Culquhoun choked and tried to kick. Yamamura already had a foot behind his ankles: a shove, and the giant fell, with Yamamura on top, still strangling him. A few seconds later, Culquhoun went limp.
Yamamura got up. Culquhoun stirred, coughed, and struggled to a sitting position.

"No hard feelings on my part," said Yamamura. "However, I do wear a black belt in the fourth degree. Mike and your wife are not going to be hurt, understand? My offer is still open. Consider it."

Deacon approached. "I'm afraid this was my fault," he breathed shakily. "But I never imagined—"

"No harm done," said Yamamura, "and maybe some good. I'll be seeing you." He went out, feeling pleased.

He thought he had recognized, on Culquhoun's face, the look of a man shocked into sanity.
The phone woke Stefanik about eight. That wasn’t too much before his usual rising hour, but yesterday had wrung him dry and afterward he had been long about getting to sleep. He fumbled his way out of bed and picked up the instrument. “Hullo.”

“Good morning, Mike.” Considerately, Deacon omitted the briskness affected by most people who have been up for a couple of hours. “How are you?”

Stefanik looked down at his arm. The ache had subsided overnight, and no blood had seeped through the bandages. “I’ll live,” he answered in an unresonant voice. His head felt sandy. “What’s the occasion?”

“Well, in part, I merely wanted to know,” said Deacon. “I hadn’t understood your situation till Yamamura explained it to me yesterday. I tried to call you after he left, but you were out.”

“Here and there,” said Stefanik, feeling that his time with Janice was no one else’s concern.

“Do you know what happened when Yamamura was here?”

“Yes. I talked to him later.”

Deacon paused. “It was good of you not to sick the police on Art,” he said slowly. “I still don’t agree he was necessarily responsible, but you saved all of us a lot of grief. And whatever the facts of the case are, at least Art has—calmed down.”
Stefanik rubbed his forehead with a fist, trying to think what long-range good there might be in Culquhoun's moderation. Little came to mind.

"I think if we simply let matters ride a few days," said Deacon, "let emotions drain off of themselves, this will all look different."

Stefanik muttered vague agreement.

"That does bring up another thing," went on Deacon, "which is not unrelated. I don't want to impose on you, especially if you're hurt, but could you drive to Stanford University?"

"Today?" Stefanik considered. He was supposed to visit the doctor again and have the dressing on his arm changed. But already yesterday afternoon the sling had been taken off, and he had been told he could make reasonable use of the hand.

"I suppose so. Why?"

"Under the circumstances, including the somewhat awkward fact that you're now Janice's—er—protector," said Deacon with caution, "you may not want to attempt an ordinary day."

"I don't feel like thinking," admitted Stefanik.

"And translation does call for pretty hard thought. Good. I'd like you to run an errand for me. Remember my mentioning a fellow at Stanford, who has some data on Russian metallurgical research? Well, after Art had cooled off yesterday—your friend having done the preliminary refrigeration—he mentioned needing to know as soon as possible just what information this man has. Art's now at a stage where he can concentrate his efforts on any of several aspects: pressure, control circuit, what have you. Naturally, he wants to work as much as he can along lines which haven't been duplicated elsewhere. If you aren't able, Mike, we can get someone else. But this has been your project too, in a way; and the fewer who know, the better. So why not take a holiday and bill us for the time?"
Stefanik couldn’t help chuckling. “All right, I will! What’s the chap’s name?”

“John Macready. He’s an associate professor of physics.” Deacon spelled the name. “You should be able to see for yourself whether his material is close enough to our work to worry about. If so, we’ll want a translation. Call the lab when you’re sure. It’ll be one less thing for Art to stew over, and he needs soothing.”

“As you wish,” said Stefanik with less enthusiasm.

“Uh—Mike.” The smooth word flow began to limp a little. “About Janice. I’m a friend of hers too, you know. How’s she doing?”

“She’s bearing up,” answered Stefanik shortly. “I made her pack some things, and installed her in a hotel. Afterward she drove me around to the doctor again and—She’s bearing up.”

“It’s difficult,” said Deacon. “She shouldn’t be alone in your flat. Art does seem calmer, but, well, let’s not take needless risks. At the same time, it isn’t well for her to sit in a rented room, brooding. But—oh, I suppose you could take her with you to Stanford, but is that wise either? I’ve known her longer than you, and frankly, Mike, I’m not certain she’d appreciate such an invitation under present circumstances.”

“Perhaps not,” said Stefanik, harking back.

“Tell you what,” said Deacon, “if she wants to rent a car, D & C will foot the bill. Then she could be independent.”

“That’s an idea.” Stefanik heard his reply curt, and told himself that Deacon was only trying to help.

“A mere suggestion. But please mention it to her.” Silence, until: “Oh, hell, Mike, I’m so damned sorry about all this! If I can do anything at all, tell me. Right now, I suppose my best deed would be to get off the line.”

Stefanik said goodbye and heard a click.

He went on into the bathroom. As he washed and shaved, his mind rehearsed the day before. It had been pretty grim.
Janice refused to move out until he told her exactly what had happened and what he thought: reserving only the unendurable part, Culquhoun's presumed reason for attempting murder. Stefanik had suggested instead that it might be a hatred sprung from mania and leached on the first random person it found. To make her believe it could indeed have been her husband, he had perforce claimed a better glimpse of his enemy than had been the truth.

Thereafter, for hours, she had tried to keep the breakup within herself shielded from his eyes. He had not before realized what punishment there can be in desperate small talk. Finally she yelled at him to let her alone, and caught a bus toward the hotel they had picked.

And now sunlight spilled across a windy world, and clouds were quick and white in the sky. An insult. Stefanik dialed Janice's refuge as soon as he was dressed. "Yes?" she cried into the phone.

"Me," he said. "Mike. How is it?"

"Rough," she whispered. "W-will you let me apologize for yesterday? You were so kind to me, and I—"

"Forget it. You needed a—uh—safety valve. I didn't wake you now, did I?"

"No. I got some sleeping pills last night, knocked myself out, but then of course I woke up again at sunrise." Listlessly: "I suppose I'd better get moving."

"Not over this way. You need the day off."

"I'm not so sure of that, Mike. It might be better to—"

"I have to go out of town. You shouldn't be alone in my place." Quickly, before the brutal implications could sink home: "Keith Deacon suggested you hire a car at the lab's expense."

"Oh, I can take a bus," she said, with the barest lilt. "I'll be at your place inside an hour, and by now I do understand that scooterbug of an MG."
“I can drive again today,” he fended. “I didn’t want you for a chauffeur. The idea was only that, uh, you could get out and—”

“Oh. I see.”

“I don’t mean you aren’t—are aren’t welcome. Naturally you are. Always. It’s just that, well, I thought perhaps you’d rather—uh—see some different people—today, that is, while I’m out—a change—”

“Yes. I understand, Mike.”

Suddenly all of him wanted to be dissolved, flesh turned into energy, to pulse down the wires at light speed and be where she was. He swallowed. “Honest, Janice,” he tried. “If there’s anything I can do.”

“No. Not right away. I think I will take Keith up on that car.”

“Sure. You’re entitled to it. Uh—that is, well, sure. Do that.” Almost, she laughed a little. “Quit trying to be so tactful. It’s only good for comic relief.”

“You will go see somebody, then?” It hammered in his blood; he was hardly aware of his own moronic words.

“I’ll go out. I don’t think I’ll visit anyone, though. What on earth is there to talk about? But it’s such a beautiful day, I could see driving up into the hills or along the coast.”

“All by yourself?” He sensed forlornness. “No, wait, Janice, you shouldn’t do that either. I’ll come around and—”

“Really, Mike, I’d like to be alone for a while too. I have a lot of thinking ahead of me. It’s best this way. So long.”

He was still gaping when she hung up.

*What did she mean, “too”? I’m not anxious for my own undiluted company. Did she think I was? But I thought she was! Stefanik knuckled his brow. Oh, Judas! Should I call back?*

His hands shook. He decided not to. They’d simply mill around in more circles, the fear of inflicting pain walling them
from each other. Maybe it was best not to see her till tommorow.

He muddled together a kind of breakfast. The coffee and cigarettes which followed took some of the shudder from him. He began looking forward to a day in the sunlight.

The freshly installed bolt on his main door reminded him that the flat was still exposed to anyone with a key while he was gone, since he couldn’t shoot the bolt from outside. He hesitated a moment, and shrugged. Yamamura had said Culquhoun might return the sword, a peace offering. Conceivably he, Stefanik, might find it here when he came back.

He drove first to the doctor’s office. Though in advance of his appointment, he found so few ahead of him at this hour that he only waited long enough to read one back issue of Time. Par for the course was about three. His wound was recovering satisfactorily. Keener than a surgeon’s knife, the sword had gone down along the muscle fibers, rather than across them; it was not a deep cut in any event, and had bled comparatively little. Stefanik wondered if, according to tradition, the sword had been slaked. Or aroused?

He dismissed melodrama and nosed his MG onto the freeway, over the Bay Bridge and south. Air streamed about him. He could look up at the Detroit cars as if from a boat, shudder at a rear end like twin Al Jolsons, scoot around and leave an equally horrible grille dwindling in his wake. Traffic grew thicker and noisier as he went, but that spiced the exhilaration. He reached Stanford University in a mood nearly cheerful.

Locating Professor Macready with the help of a departmental secretary, Stefanik discovered he must wait half an hour for the end of a class. He sat outside, chain smoking and watching coeds pass by, resolutely not wondering how Janice fared.

Luck was not all hostile: it turned out Macready’s papers were in his office, not at home. “Mr. Deacon had already said
you might be calling to see them,” the physicist explained. “I met him at one of those professional gatherings not long ago, when I gave a talk on my visit to Russia. He was quite eager to know what I’d learned about current research over there in alloy tempering. That’s out of my line, however. I did mention my discussion with Andreyev, who gave me some notes and some issues of a little mimeographed progress diary. But it all had to do with studies of hysteresis micropatterns. Deacon didn’t seem to think that was very interesting. Then, just the other day, he called and said he might be sending a man down to look at my material. Why did he change his mind?”

“It was changed for him,” said Stefanik. “His partner, Culquhoun, is doing some developmental work, and it—uh—turns out this may have a bearing on it after all.”

“Well, that’s different,” said Macready. “Frankly, Deacon didn’t impress me as a scientist—isn’t he more of an executive? —but of course I know Culquhoun’s work. Here you are. Just sit down here at my desk and read. I have another class now. I’ll look in afterward.”

Stefanik settled himself with the papers. Though far from an expert, he had inevitably gained some idea of Tomek’s theory. The Soviet research was ingenious, but bore no particular relationship to the project at D & C. One investigated magnetic properties and drew some incidental conclusions about flaws in ferrous crystal lattices; the other probed resonant frequencies of the strange multimetallic molecules in alloys, and tried to promote the autocatalysis of desired patterns. Stefanik took a few notes, but didn’t think Culquhoun would want to pay for a full translation.

Macready found him leafing through Reviews of Modern Physics. “Through so soon?” he asked. When Stefanik explained, the physicist was a bit crestfallen. “Oh. No use at all. Are you sure? No offense meant, but Culquhoun ought to know what he can use.”
"He may need the information," said Stefanik. "But I suspect Deacon gave him a slightly garbled account, and your papers here aren't quite what he believed. Unless—" He felt the blood go out of his face.

"What's the matter?" asked Macready, a little alarmed.

"Thanks for your trouble."

"No trouble. To be honest, I'd hoped to get a translation myself. I have only a very weak reading knowledge of Russian, but it's enough so I blush to ask one of my colleagues to put this in English for me. —Oh, well, I won't be referring to it much. Maybe never."

Stefanik bade an absent-minded goodbye and wandered from the building. The thought still churned in him: **Maybe Culquhoun only wanted me out of town today.**

He had an impulse to rush home, but suppressed it and called D & C from a public booth. To Deacon he reported drawing blank. He could imagine the balding big-nosed face show puzzlement. "Art seemed very anxious to know what was in those papers," said Deacon. "But I admit I can't see why, unless he misunderstood my account of them. I'll ask him again."

"Shall I hold the line? He may still want to borrow the stuff."

"N-no. Don't bother. It can't be that urgent. You sound rather tired."

Stefanik glanced at his watch. "After one, and no lunch yet. That accounts for it."

"Not entirely. Go ahead, Mike, take the rest of today off, at least. If ever a man needed to dawdle, away from all the world—" Deacon hesitated. "Whether or not Art really is—is responsible, the firm owes you something for his lack of manners. I'd feel a lot better if you charged us for this whole day, with expenses."
“You don’t have to worry about me,” snapped Stefanik. “Janice accepted that car; the rental outfit checked with me, so I know. You could—”

“Look, Keith,” said Stefanik through upspringing anger, “you mean well, but I’ve gotten God damn’ sick of all these little intrigues and little politenesses and little bruisable egos. Lay off!”

Deacon sighed. “I hoped I wouldn’t have to say this, Mike. But it’s occurred to me, Art may have planned to get you out of Berkeley.”

“What?” Stefanik was jarred to hear his own idea spoken. “I could be wrong,” said Deacon hastily. “But—in case—it might be well to humor him. This once. He’s not a well man. He was always proud and secretive. If he really has been after you, he’d never bring himself to an open apology, but you should give him a chance to make amends in his own queer way.”

Stefanik remembered his notion of the morning, that the sword might be at his home when he returned. But in someone’s hand?

“I’ll try sounding him out,” continued Deacon. “If there’s any reason for worry, I’ll inform Yamamura. But if that’s true, you’re better off out of town anyhow, Mike.”

The chill in Stefanik thawed a little. “All right,” he capitulated.

“Thanks,” said Deacon quietly. “For everything.”

Stefanik left the booth and drove into Palo Alto. He was still in no shape to do a meal justice, but substituted a cheese-burger and milk shake. Afterward, feeling a need of horizons, he drove out to the coast and as far south as Pescadero Beach.

He had the strand, under sheer cliffs, to himself this afternoon. The ocean blazed quicksilver directly beneath the sun; elsewhere it was green and gray, aswirl with virginal foam. The breakers came marching landward in great wrinkled
walls, that lifted and lifted and then curled over, a piece at a time, to cannonade through miles. Stefanik could hear the longdrawn roar that followed among rocks beyond the water line, through his feet and bones as well as his ears. The wind was sharp with iodine and clean sunlit rottings. Gull wings cut it like sword blades.

When he left, toward evening, he felt much eased. Whatever became of him, the sea would always follow the moon around this planet, and shout on lonely beaches. Let man burn himself off the earth, the sea would bring forth life again.

You could get too *sub specie aeternitatis*, though. Especially alone at dusk, in an open car, with stars blinking one by one to life. Stefanik drove hard, passing a few villages but grateful when San Francisco's lights painted the sky before him. He entered the city in a mood for a good dinner and some Mozart; and he knew the very place to supply both.

That, and a cigar afterward, were more calming than wise words. But he didn't wish the stillness of his apartment. Not yet. He would have a few drinks, or slightly more, and come home able to sleep.

He circulated for a couple of hours in San Francisco, and then crossed the Bay. His route up University Avenue took him close to the Howl. A sudden impulse spun the wheel, he turned south on San Pablo and braked near the dim-lit entrance. It would be pleasant to sit over a final glass, thinking about old days. By and large, his life had been fun. There was also the future to dwell on. Surely the present situation would soon be over with, wounds would heal and certain brown eyes turn hopeward again. . . . Or he might find someone worth talking to.

He entered. A voice whooped: "Hi! Sit down!" He glanced around and saw Gregory Ionescu at a table with a bottle of wine.

That wasn't quite his idea of company, but the boy bounced
up, took him by the arm and propelled him toward a seat. “Come on, join me. The place is dead tonight. I think there must be a party somewhere. I drove around looking for it, but nobody seemed to be at their pad, so I came on down here. What are you having? I liberated ten dollars today. It’s on me. Name it.”

Stefanik yielded. “That red ink looks okay.”

Ionescu got another glass and poured for him. “You’re the cat with Janice the other night, aren’t you? Yes, I remember now. The translator. She used to talk quite a bit about you, when I dropped over to her house.”

Startled, Stefanik looked into the other face. “She did?” Ionescu smiled knowingly. “More than just your being her boss. Where is she tonight?”

“At home.”

“I wonder why. You know her husband? I guess you do. Know what he is? A tesseract. A math student I know explained it to me. A tesseract is a square in four dimensions.” Ionescu laughed. The inexcusably beard wafted around his cheeks.

“Oh, that just panics them in the halls of Berkeley High,” Stefanik murmured sourly.

Ionescu’s smile became a little timid. He seemed afraid his guest would depart and leave him alone. “I can’t understand why she puts up with him,” he said. “Can you? I mean, it’s just not like sensible. I don’t say she ought to take me up on my proposition. I love her, you know. But I’m not going to prostitute myself to support a woman. I suppose,” he decided, “she has a masochistic streak. A lot of women do. That’s part of my trouble. I’m not at all sadistic.” Quickly: “Not that I haven’t had my fun, man. But I haven’t got time to domineer. Too much like work.”

Ionescu paused before he continued, speculatively: “Of
course, she's not simply taking it. From her husband, I mean—Hey!” His eyes widened, staring across the table. “Hey, are you the cat she—”

“Hold it!” Stefanik rapped. Ionescu looked so startled that he decided the indifferent approach was better for killing whatever back fence gossip this was. If he allowed himself anger, the scene would enhance a juicy story. He pumped coolness along his nerves until he could resume with careful sardonicism: “Not being licensed to practice psychoanalysis, I'd rather keep the talk off personalities. Dull subject; who ever heard of a scandal with originality?”

Ionescu had no trouble making a quantum jump. “Okay, whatever you want. Say, you're an expert on Russian science. Why don’t you address the rally next Friday? I can arrange it.” At Stefanik’s blank look: “The anti-guided-missile rally.”

“Be glad to,” said Stefanik. “I can list about ten good reasons why this country should make more and bigger missiles.”

After a disconcerted moment, Ionescu favored him with another knowing grin. “Let's see if I can guess them. First, each one means about a million dollars’ profit for—”

“Oh, forget it. I imagine you were in that protest march on the local A.E.C. offices last winter, when the rain got radio-active?”

“Sure was, man. Remember that saying then? Instead of ‘Drop dead’ you told a cat, ‘Go walk in the rain.’”

“What I remember,” shrugged Stefanik, “is that the radioactivity came primarily from Russian tests.”

He was spared further argument by the entry of a group of talented youth. Ionescu joined them with glad cries. Someone called for bongo drums, and before long the bar was thunderous with Togetherness.

Stefanik finished his wine and left.

He considered going elsewhere, it wasn’t much past ten,
but weariness began to drag at him. He felt pretty relaxed by now. Bed, with a final tumbler of burgundy and something gentle on the record player, would end his day quite well.

He stamped down reborn fear, but nonetheless carried a tire iron up the lane from his parking place. Nothing stirred: his footfalls seemed unduly loud. He let himself into the entry and climbed the stairs. The living room was too big for one man, he thought, and his own housekeeping piled up subtle disorder between the visits of his cleaning woman. All at once, he felt smotheringly alone.

The enameled sword rack was still bare. The window opened on cities glittering down hillsides, out to the water and up the far shore, but they were remote as stars.

Well—

He went through the different chores of bedtime. Mendelssohn’s “Violin Concerto” was striking up behind him as he walked through the flat in pajamas, a glass in one hand. The bedroom door stood ajar. He pushed through. The linoleum was cold under his bare feet. He trod in stickiness and looked down.

The blood had flowed from wall to wall before stiffening. He saw the shape huddled across his bed, and stepped back with the brain rocking in his skull. “No,” whimpered someone else. “No, no. Please.”

His heel struck a mass cold and pobody. It bumped across the floor. He looked down upon Arthur Culquhoun’s head. The mouth was drawn back, showing teeth as if to bite, and the filmed eyes bulged upward toward his.
Yamamura lived not far away, and had still been up. He arrived within minutes of Stefanik's call. Windows were lighted in all three houses along the lane. Their glow picked out crowding leafage, the steps, and the neat tan uniforms of police. One man, on guard at Stefanik's door, tried to stop him. "Sorry, you can't go in, sir. There's been a murder."

"I know," said Yamamura. "I want to explain how I did it." He brushed by. An amazed hand closed on his arm. He released himself with a simple judo break, yanking between fingers and thumb, and went on up the stairs. The policeman quacked behind.

Inspector Harries appeared at the landing. "Oh, it's you Trig," he said.

"He confessed—" began the officer.

"Confession is good for the soul," said Yamamura. "It's also the easiest way to get by your dutiful sentry. Why didn't you tell him I was coming?"

Harries dismissed his man with a nod. "I didn't know myself. Did Stefanik call? Somebody will catch it for not watching him."

"Yeh. I suppose you couldn't know he's fairly sensible, and wouldn't spread hysterics."

The inspector's heavy features knotted into a frown. "I couldn't even know whether he'd try to bolt."
Yamamura bridled. "Wait a minute! Mike Stefanik is not only my client, he's my friend. I know him, and—"

"I'm not accusing anyone of anything yet," said Harries. He turned. "It's a bit irregular, but you may as well have a look. You might even be able to help. Damnedest crime I ever heard of. That's really why I came here in person, at this stage."

"What happened, anyway? Mike just told me he'd found Culquhoun dead."

"Dead, yes! The guy's head is off."

Yamamura stopped in his stride. Harries gave him a quizzi-cal glance. But the inspector, and the house, and the men who walked about with their cameras and powders and tape measures seemed suddenly far away. Their voices came to Yamamura with something of the meaningless clarity that voices heard in delirium possess.

"Anything wrong?" asked Harries.

Yamamura cleared his throat. "Do you have the weapon?"

"No. And frankly, I can't think what it might have been. There are some swords around here, but—"

"Oh, it was a sword," whispered Yamamura. "A katana by Muramasa of Ise."

He shook himself, as to awaken from fourteenth-century combat masks grinning and glaring at him. "Where's Mike?"

"In there." Harries remained standing as Yamamura went past, but beckoned to an officer with a notebook.

Stefanik sat on the edge of the living room couch. His hands hung limp between his knees, and he stared blank-eyed at a lithograph on the wall. Yamamura joined him. "Hi," he said. He took out his pipe and began to fill it.

Stefanik jerked. His unfocused face turned to the other man's. "Oh. Trig," he said, low and mechanically.

"Nasty business. Did you simply come in and find it?" Yamamura knew a small astonishment that his own words came out
so steadily, that his pulse was normal and only his hands felt cold.

"Yes. I called the police. Later I thought you might—"

"What were you doing all day?"

"I went down to Stanford on an errand. Then I sort of drifted around. Had some drinks. Came in, oh, maybe half past ten."

"And you've no idea how this might have happened?"

"Christ, no." It was more prayer than profanity.

"You haven't informed anyone else?"

"No." Stefanik's knuckles stood forth white as he rubbed his forehead. "I guess I'll have to tell Janice. Myself. How am I going to do it?"

"Should I?"

"No. I can't slough that off. Maybe you'd come with me, come in and join us after—" Stefanik turned his head again to regard the detective, slowly, as if his neckbones were stiff. His wide hook-nosed face was without color, the eyes a washed-out green rimmed with white. "Find who did it, Trig," he mumbled. "Find that sword and throw it in the sea."

Yamamura struck a match on his thumbnail. He drew smoke farther down his throat than he was wont and let it stay there a while, biting. Enough will returned for him to summon up the relaxation techniques of the dojo, the judo school. He contemplated the paradox of what noise a single hand would make clapping, until immediacy faded and he could once more move as an organism. Then he rose, went to the liquor cabinet and came back with a half tumbler of whisky.

"Pull on this for a while," he said. "I'll go look for myself."

He continued through the flat to the bedroom. A piece of canvas had been laid down across a thick smear which covered most of the floor, so one could reach the bed on the opposite side with unbefouled shoes. The blood had turned almost
black, but here and there the light fell on it with a sullen reddish iridescence. It had drenched Stefanik's blankets, mattress, and box spring until they seemed one swamp, with clottings like hummocks and the inside still squelching to the touch. A police officer was going through the pockets of that which lay on the bed. With the coroner's man present, it had been straightened out from its original sprawl. It rested on its back, feet and palms turned up, horribly shortened.

Yamamura edged closer, careful to hold most of his nerves disengaged. The body wore plain street clothes, the tie obscenely frivolous around the stump of a neck. The head had been placed on a night table. With all the blood gone, it looked even further from life than most corpses. (Part of Yamamura wondered why a terminated human always appeared so much more dead than an animal, and thought that perhaps it was because man had no fur to cover his poor waxen skin, and speculated that a race of furry intelligent beings might be less afraid of their dead than man is.) The eyes were wide and milky. Yamamura had sometimes wished the old superstition were true, that a retina kept the image of the last thing seen, but this time he was glad of the fact. He had no wish to look upon the death of Arthur Culquhoun.

He drifted back to Inspector Harries, who stood near the door by a dresser. The medical man was speaking: "—official opinion after the autopsy. But I doubt if we'll establish the time any closer than my present guess, based on the extent of blood clotting. Around three or four o'clock this afternoon, give or take a couple of hours."

"Close enough," said Harries. His blue gaze remained with a smeared pair of objects which had been placed on a canvas atop the bureau. Yamamura recognized a little microphonic unit and a toolbox.

"What's that doing?" he asked.

"We found these next to the bed," answered Harries. "My
guess is Culquhoun was about to drill a hole through the wall, a fine one for leading a wire out. The bed stands against the wall, you see, so the hole wouldn’t be visible. The microphone would lie underneath the bed, tied to a slat maybe, and the greenery outside would keep any wire trailing across to the corner of the house from being noticed. Then the wire could have run down behind the rainspout. Any night he wanted, Culquhoun could have sneaked up the lane and attached a listening gimmick, or a recorder.” Harries ran a hand through his gray mane. “But why did he want to bug Stefani’s place?”

“Wouldn’t the neighbors have noticed him stringing that wire?”

“Not this afternoon. The couple downstairs both work. So do the people in the northside house. The wife on the opposite side is home by day, but the hedges and trees block off her view. She didn’t see a thing.”

“As Culquhoun doubtless foreknew,” said Yamamura. He puffed forth blue clouds.

“Others as well, I suspect. I’m glad after all that you came, Trig. There’s a hell of a lot you can tell me, if you’re already mixed in this affair.”

The officer who had been ransacking Culquhoun’s pockets brought the contents over on a tray. They looked pitifully ordinary, except for a hotel key on which Harries pounced.

“What’s this doing?” he barked.

“He wasn’t staying at home the last few days,” said Yamamura. “He’s the sort who would stick his room key in a pocket when going out, instead of leaving it at the desk.”

“Not home? But Stefani told me he was married—”

“This Yale key is more interesting,” said Yamamura. “Go see if it opens the door downstairs, will you?”

The policeman glanced at Harries, caught a nod, and called the fingerprint man. “Nothing,” said the expert after a minute’s work. “The usual smudges. Why does everybody think a finger-
print stays nice and clear on every damn' thing you touch?" The officer took the key and departed.

"This gets more and more complicated," said Harries. "What were you remarking about a sword, Trig?"

Yamamura fumbled his pipe in his hands, staring at it. "The so-called samurai swords are a hobby of mine, as you may know," he began, word by reluctant word. "I say so-called because the entire samurai class was officially abolished in the Meiji Restoration, and even in the old days not all the blades were used by samurai. The wakizashi and tanto were sometimes borne by civilians for protection, even by women. Furthermore, some blades aren't swords, but belonged to spears or halberds—"

"Quit stalling," clipped Harries. "Can you say for certain this was a sword cut?"

"N-no. A keen ax on a chopping block could have done a similar job, I suppose."

"That wasn't the case. If there'd been any kind of block, later carried away, it would have left its traces in the blood that ran out over everything. And of course a piece of furniture used for such a purpose would bear a cut itself; none do in this house. Anyway, the blood itself, the traces in it, pretty well show what happened. Culquhoun had put down his bug and his toolbox. I imagine he knelt to take a preliminary look under the bed. He got up again. He'd probably not yet risen to his full height, because the cut slants downward from the left rear, and he was a tall man. The murderer beheaded him in one stroke. The body collapsed forward, onto the bed. The head flew across the room and hit the floor near the entrance. The murderer must have leaped back from the blood, because the only tracks in it were Stefanik's recent ones."

"Uh-huh. Well," said Yamamura, "the blade in question was certainly sharp enough to do the job. It wouldn't have required
unusual strength, even. As I told you, I've studied the subject a little. And during the war, in the CBI theater, I saw the results of occasional sword work. A lot of Japanese officers carried them, you know, even used them for hand-to-hand fighting. Mostly Showa blades, not to be compared with Koto or Shinto period, but still good steel."

Harries' mouth drew tight. "What do you mean, the blade in question?" he demanded. "You mean the one Stefanik told us was stolen Monday night?"

"Yes," said Yamamura, very quietly. "Is it reasonable to think any other weapon could be involved? That thing is by Muramasa."

The deputed policeman came back. "The key fits the door all right, sir," he announced.

"Of course the murderer could lock the door behind him again simply by closing it," reminded Yamamura.

"S-s-so," Harries took out a cigarette, lit it, and scowled for a while. "Is a Muramasa sword especially good?" he asked.

"Or especially evil, depending on how you think," said Yamamura.

Harries made a face. "Oh, Lord! That's the worst of living in a university town. The cases we get! Well, back to the public library tomorrow."

He left the death-stinking bedroom. Yamamura followed him into the dining chamber. Harries sat down on the table, swinging one leg, and stared at the other man. His expression grew hard.

"Here are the facts so far, from our viewpoint," he said. "Monday night Stefanik calls us, claiming someone burgled his place and got away with a sword after a brush with him in the dark. All we actually know, for certain, is that the man downstairs heard a racket, came up to investigate, and Stefanik babbled about murder attempted on him. Only—Stefanik
played that aspect down when our men arrived. A lot of people do, to be sure; while they wait for the police, they realize they were overexcited.

“But tonight he calls us again, to report this. He identifies the corpse as a man he knows, and admits the man’s wife is in his employ. He says some incoherent things about Culquhoun having been responsible for the affair Monday night, and for a similar one Tuesday which we didn’t hear about. The linoleum kept the blood from soaking through the plaster downstairs, and the lane is screened everywhere with assorted trees and bushes, so nobody knew anything of it till Stefanik phoned us. We can check his claim to have been at Stanford and Palo Alto till about two o’clock, but he could then have reached Berkeley in an hour or less, if he’s a sports car driver. He could have come in, found Culquhoun bugging the place, killed him in a rage, and fled—coming back later to brazen it out. Or, in view of his previous report to us, the whole thing may have been some elaborate plot to lure Culquhoun here while diverting suspicion from himself. Culquhoun didn’t have that house key by accident!”

“You can try to backcheck all his movements,” said Yamamura.

“Of course we will. We don’t want a patsy, for God’s sake, we want the killer. But you see, Stefanik claims to have been alone from about two to six or six-thirty. Didn’t speak to a soul. Unless someone just happened to notice his MG—well, we’ll do what we can for him, but you must admit, Trig, we’re duty bound to establish his bona fides.

“So all right.” The inspector came near anger in his look at Yamamura. “I gather he’d engaged you. Why? What can you tell us that Stefanik hasn’t?”

Yamamura’s pipe had gone out. He relit it with care. “It’s a long story,” he said.

“We’ve got all night,” answered Harries.
"How about notifying Culquhoun's wife?"
"I sent a man around to break the news, but she wasn't home."
"Mike should have told you that. Guess he didn't think of it, in the shock. She's staying at a hotel too. A different one."
"What?"
Yamamura could see the question grow behind Harries' eyes. \textit{And what was she doing today, and why?}
He could not, himself, avoid telling the basic events. Too many others knew the situation, and would be interviewed. But Yamamura wondered, coldly, how much detail he could suppress and distort: not to tell an outright lie, but neither to tell the real truth. He wondered how much he dared be frank about.

The fact was that Stefanik had owned the sword. The story was that the sword would make its owner a murderer, or else find ways to destroy him.
By late forenoon, the D & C Company looked almost normal again. Men went about their work, tapped the coffee machine, chatted while some process completed itself. But after a minute standing by the main entrance, Yamamura could feel how thin the calm was. Unease twitched through every motion; talk was muted and rapid. Presently someone would offer to take up a collection and buy flowers. There might be a delegation to express sympathy or solidarity or whatever. But now the catastrophe was still being enjoyed in all its richness.

Yamamura went on upstairs, nodded politely to the secretary who asked his business, and opened the door of Deacon’s office under her indignant objection. Past the esoterically cluttered worktable he saw Deacon and Pereira already seated at the desk. The financier raised his dark aristocratic head. “Ah, there you are, Trig. Good morning.”

Deacon looked nonplused. “Excuse me,” he faltered, “but I don’t know—we’re deciding policy in view of—”

“I invited him,” said Pereira.

“At my suggestion.” Yamamura sat down and took out his pipe. “I’m here partly as a representative of Mrs. Culquhoun’s interests, she being in no shape to come.”

“Were you there when she learned—I mean, I hope she isn’t too broken up,” said Deacon.
“It was a shock,” said Yamamura. “She took it well. But nevertheless, a pretty cruel shock.”

“Hideous situation.” Deacon raised his mild gray eyes. “But surely you don’t think we’d take advantage of her condition.”

“No,” said Yamamura. “Anyhow, I didn’t refer to business operations. Frankly, I don’t know my spectrum from a hole in the ground, and double entry bookkeeping has always sounded to me as if it should have to do with some con game at the race track. But the fact is, murder has been committed in an unnecessarily gruesome fashion, the murderer is still loose, the tale is smeared over every paper in the country. I want to help wind up this business as fast as possible.”

“The police—”

“Are good men, and I wouldn’t interfere with them. But having some prior acquaintance with all concerned, and not being forbidden by any official position from giving a bit of advice, I might be useful too.”

Deacon murmured shrewdly: “I thought you were working on Mike’s behalf.”

“I am,” said Yamamura. “That doesn’t mean I’m opposed to anyone else, except the murderer. It’s obvious from the newspapers this morning, Mike’s public appeal for witnesses to his whereabouts yesterday afternoon, that he’s under strong suspicion. I don’t believe he did it, and it’s hardly to your advantage that the real killer run free any longer than needful.”

“I weighed all these arguments myself, when Trig called me early this morning with the news,” said Pereira. “We do need a sympathetic expert. Badly. Just think how a prolonged scandal can injure the company, Keith, if you aren’t interested in the harm done to individuals.”

“Oh, I am,” said Deacon gently. “You ought to know me better than that, Oswaldo.” His head drooped. Fluorescent light gleamed on the high temples and between the strands of ginger hair. “Horrible,” he whispered. “Poor damned Art.”
Then, a renewed crispness: "My own session with the reporters rubbed me pretty raw, Mr. Yamamura. That's why I objected. I take it back, and apologize. In fact, if you would name a retainer—"

"No money," said Yamamura. "I'm still Mike's partisan."

Pereira regarded him thoughtfully. "Suppose Mike is guilty," he said. "I don't want to speak it, but we must. There is some kind of case against him."

"Sure, there is," said Yamamura. "I'll outline it for you myself. He had motive. A lot of people think he was carrying on with Janice Culquhoun. If so, there were various possible results. First, and ugliest, they conspired together to kill Culquhoun. I'm not sure how the community property law works out in this state when the husband charges adultery—I don't touch divorce work myself—but one way or another, Culquhoun probably could have eased her out of any share in your very promising enterprise. Which, in effect, would also let Mike out."

He fell silent while he lit his pipe. When smoke had blurred his face, he continued: "Janice hasn't any alibi for yesterday afternoon either. She says she simply drove up to Tilden Park and went for a long walk in the woods, sat on a log a couple of hours to think, that sort of activity. Not another human creature around. She didn't get back to town till nearly dark. And she has a key to Stefanik's place."

"I didn't know that!" said Pereira.

"No. That angle has been played down by the police so far. They don't want to bring an attractive girl like her into the case at all, if they can possibly help it. There's already enough sensation to make their work ten times as difficult. But I know Inspector Harries has assigned a man to tracing her movements of the past few days, and another to watching her."

"But it's impossible!" exclaimed Deacon. "Too repulsive to—No, I won't even talk about it."
“Mike could have embroidered some intricate scheme to murder Culquhoun,” said Yamamura. “He could have faked the theft of his sword, and wounded himself, and so on. He could have lured Culquhoun to his place yesterday on some pretext—with or without Janice’s help—killed him, and left again, to return at night.

“A simpler explanation is that Culquhoun really did steal the sword and attack Mike on those two occasions: presumably because Mike and Janice had been having an affair. So when Mike came home and found him bugging the place, Mike slew him. Doubtless with the Muramasa blade, which Culquhoun had along and which Mike later hid. The police lab is checking all his other swords, but I’m pretty sure they won’t find anything. Or alternatively, after those two attacks by Culquhoun, Mike deliberately plotted the man’s death, to prevent further trouble.”

Pereira looked lost, though Yamamura had already explained the background to him over the telephone. Deacon nodded slowly.

“It’s a nice set of possibilities,” finished Yamamura. “Doesn’t contradict any evidence available to date, either. Only trouble is, I know Mike and I don’t believe a word of it.”

He smoked a while without speaking. The sky outside was winter-gum. Traffic brawled and boomed. He thought of the cities reaching for mile upon mile along the Bayshore, and wondered where in all that many-caverned concrete wilderness the sword lay hidden.

“Perhaps,” ventured Pereira, “we can learn something from Culquhoun’s own movements.”

“The police have already swarmed over the lab wanting to know that,” answered Deacon. Resignedly: “But I guess I can tell the story once again. After Mr. Yamamura left Wednesday, having won that fight without even breathing hard, Art was very subdued. He slouched into his own office, and God knows
what he thought. But when he finally emerged, he came to me and spoke only of his project. He'd been neglecting it of late, brooding. Now, though, he mentioned wanting to check those Russian papers of Macready's at Stanford, and I said I'd send Mike on the errand. Art went out for a while and came back bathed, shaved, wearing clean clothes. I really believed you had taught him a lesson, Mr. Yamamura. We had dinner together that evening, avoided personalities in our conversation, but finally he said he'd go home and see if his wife had returned. Of course she hadn't, but I understand from the police that he obviously spent the night there, though he didn't check out of his hotel either.

"He showed up rather late yesterday morning. About two o'clock he came in here and said he had outside business and wanted to quit for the rest of the day. He was carrying his tool kit. I suppose that microphone unit must have been in his car. Perhaps he'd bought it earlier in the morning. I had a lot of work, was very preoccupied, so I didn't do much more than look up from my desk and say okay."

Deacon rubbed his eyes. "That was the last time I ever saw Art," he finished in a tired voice.

"How did he look?" asked Pereira.

"I didn't really notice. Worn down, I think, quiet, perhaps a certain suppressed tension. But I honestly thought he might have hit bottom in that cursed nervous cycle of his, and started upward again." Deacon shook his head. "It's a pity you never knew Art Culquhoun at his best, Mr. Yamamura. He was a wonderful man then, in every sense." Harshness: "I think I'll offer a reward for his murderer's arrest. I want whoever did it in the gas chamber."

"Even you?" said Yamamura without emphasis.

"What?" Deacon jerked in his chair.

"I'm intimating nothing, understand," said Yamamura. "This
is only an exploration of the facts and the possibilities. So let's play with the idea that you wanted his share of this growing business for yourself."

Deacon shook his head again. "Janice would inherit that, you know."

"Or just wanted to be rid of an obstreperous, irascible character who seems to have thrown more than one barrier in front of some perfectly good plans. You might have been physically afraid of him—because even that short glimpse I had, that brush when he blew up over some harmless little remark and did his best to put me in the hospital—that was enough to convince me he was dangerous. It's a major reason to believe Mike's story. Culquhoun was absolutely a potential killer. What threats might he not have growled at you from time to time, Mr. Deacon?"

"And I would attack someone that size?" The executive's question had a ghost of amusement.

"Fear is as potent a motivation as ever existed," Yamamura answered. "You'd be surprised how much hell it releases."

"But do you mean I could have stolen that sword—with the help of Janice's key to Mike's flat—and gone through all that rigmarole with the attempts on him, and— No, really, you flatter me!"

Yamamura lifted one corner of his mouth. "I called up those van Tyne people," he said. "The ones you were playing bridge with, the second time Mike was attacked. They confirm it. So any theory involving you has to be rather elaborate."

"It has to be straight out of science fiction," Deacon told him. "I was here at the laboratory all day yesterday. While Art was at Mike's, being—being killed—I was wrestling with ledgers and manifests at this desk. I wish I were enough of a scientist to invent a time machine and be in two places at once, but I'm afraid such talents as I have are more for business."
Yamamura leaned back in the swivel chair, crossed long legs, and jabbed his pipestem in Pereira’s direction. “Then there’s you, Oswaldo,” he said. “No offense—”

“Certainly not.” Pereira smiled, but his eyes remained sad. “Culquhoun was about to boot you out of your silent partnership in D & C, just before he got the Tomek process in patentable shape and the really worthwhile profits commenced. You were more than irritated about it, as I recall. What’s your alibi?”

Pereira extracted a cigarillo from a sumptuous coat. “Vague,” he admitted. “It happens I was on this side of the Bay all day yesterday, attending to various business. Short conferences, d’you know, scattered from Hayward to Richmond over a period of hours. How closely has the time of death been fixed?”

“Around three o’clock, plus or minus at least one hour. Culquhoun skipped lunch, apparently, so the stomach contents don’t establish—”

Pereira winced. “Please. Yes, I might have stopped off on my way between appointments, about then, and killed him.”

“And you are a swordsman: not only a collector, but you know how to use a katana as well as a foil.” Yamamura’s glance flickered from one to another. “Would you mind drawing up timetables of your movements during, say, the past week? As nearly hour by hour as possible.”

Deacon frowned. “Now wait a minute. We do have our own work.”

“I know. It’s a damned chore, and of course I can’t compel you. But if you really want to help—You see, it’s far more than a mechanical process of checking off who could and could not have been at the scene at such and such a time. Hell, there must be ten thousand people in this area who could have done it. I’m trying to straighten out motivations, interactions. If Culquhoun was not with you at a given time, it may eliminate one line of inquiry.”
“All right. Agreed.” Deacon sat still a moment, until: “Not to cast insinuations, may I suggest you check on Roy Linden?”

“Hm?” Yamamura thought back. “Oh, yes, your chief engineer. I gather he didn’t like Culquhoun much.”

“Art stood in his way in several respects, and there was personal friction as well. Furthermore, Roy was absent all day yesterday—and today. He told me in advance he was going to be, but wouldn’t say why. Just muttered something about family affairs.” Deacon added quickly, “Mind you, I can’t believe he did it. But he does seem to represent some underbrush which ought to be cleared away as soon as possible.”

“Yes,” said Yamamura. “Yes, indeed.”

“Have you mentioned him to the police?” asked Pereira.

“No. Not yet.” Deacon looked confused. “They never asked me, and in all the hullabaloo— Should I?”

“Let me inquire first,” proposed Yamamura. “It may, as you say, prove to be nothing at all.”

“I should think,” said Pereira, “if you really are interested in proving Mike’s innocence, you would be at Palo Alto and points west, looking for witnesses.”

“Uh-uh,” denied Yamamura. “The police have more resources for that than I. And they’ll make an honest attempt. If they fail, and it really begins to look black, I may have to go down myself. But at present, I think I can serve his interests best by working up here.”

Pereira’s gibe was benign: “And solving the case yourself?”

“Why, sure. Wouldn’t that boost my business?” Yamamura grinned and stood up. “All right, gentlemen, I’ll go away now. I advise you to avoid talking unduly about this, and never to be alone.”

“Why?” asked Deacon.

Yamamura’s face turned flinty. “The murderer is still at large,” he answered. “Until we know who it is, we can’t be sure the sword’s work is done.”

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He went out, closing the door behind him. The secretary stared from her open office. Yamamura shifted his pipe, donned a smile he didn’t really feel, and sauntered in.

“I’m a detective, miss.” He flashed his wallet, hoping she would think the card gave him some official standing. “Do you mind if I repeat a few questions the police must already have asked?”

“Oh, no. No, not at all. Please sit down.” She leaned over her desk. “Poor Mr. Culquhoun! Did you see the—the body?”

He nodded, but didn’t satisfy her obvious wish for details. “We’re trying to ascertain his movements,” he said. “You seem to have a good view of this floor and the stairway. Did you notice what time he came to work yesterday?”

“No. I was busy then. Correspondence. The rat race.” She fluffed grayed hair. “But I remember one of the engineers, Charlie Olson, asked me about ten if I knew where he was. And I did see him when I went out for lunch. So I guess he came in between ten o’clock and noon.”

“How did he look? How behave?”

“Gloomy, I think. But he was very quiet. He had been so bad-tempered before, honestly, a real ulcerator. Now all at once he was acting civilized again. I never had much to do with him, though. I’m more on the business end, with Mr. Deacon.”

“Do you know what time Culquhoun left this place?”

“About two. I saw him go into Mr. Deacon’s office. I remem- ber because Mr. Deacon had said, just a short time before, that he was going to be busy all afternoon and wasn’t to be dis- turbed. He’s always very strict about that. At such times I wouldn’t dare message him to say there’s going to be an air raid. So I called to Mr. Culquhoun to stop, in a nice way of course, but he just went on in. He came out again in a few minutes and walked down the stairs carrying his toolbox.” She shuddered delicately. “Think of it! Going to his death! The
poor man—he was so unhappy. His wife was cheating on him, you know.”

“Oh, so you’ve heard that gossip too.” Yamamura veered from the subject. It would do no harm to check on Deacon, who had conceivably protested too much. “Uh—are you sure Mr. Deacon was in his office all afternoon?”

“Yes. I had to stop a couple of technicians from going in to him with questions, so you understand I was watching his door with half an eye all the time. Let me see—Yes. About three he messaged me over the intercom. He said to call a New York supplier we deal with and ask them to urgentize a shipment we have on tap.” Yamamura was so nauseated that he barely heard the rest: “Mr. Deacon came out about four-thirty, took a coffee break and spoke with those technicians and so on. He worked late, as he often does, so I guess nobody saw him leave the building that night, if that’s what you’re driving at.”

Yamamura recalled the layout of Deacon’s office. No fire escape, either to the street or the gloomy alley on which the window of the private lavatory opened. But speculation was pointless, since Deacon had talked to his secretary very near the time Culquhoun’s head leaped from its shoulders.

_I’m not quite done with him_, thought Yamamura. _He may well be involved in some other way. This is a spider web of a case. But for now there’s enough else to search. Such as where Roy Linden has been all this while._
Stefanik halted his MG outside the Culquhoun house. He crossed a short path through the yard, the porch steps beyond, to the front door, with deliberate slowness. Another automobile went by; otherwise the residential street was nearly deserted in an early-afternoon drowse. Stefanik nodded to himself. That car had followed him from his apartment. He swept his eyes down the ranks of parked vehicles, and saw that a man sat in one with a newspaper.

Janice opened the door. “Mike—”

Still lost in his realization, he said half aloud: “So you’ve got a police shadow too.”

“What?” She cupped a hand behind her better ear.

He swore at himself for a fool. She had enough to endure. And, after all, the man trailing her might simply be for protection. “Nothing,” he said. He stood a while, filling himself with the sight of her, though in many ways it hurt.

She held herself straight, in a plain blouse and skirt. The short blond hair was combed; make-up around the tilted eyes hid the marks of sleeplessness and of the deep racking way she had wept last night. But her mouth was not quite steady, and the high-boned face seemed never to have laughed.

“How is it, kid?” he asked.

“All right,” she said listlessly. “Come in.” As she closed the
door behind them, she added with more life, "I was so afraid I wouldn’t be able to locate you, Mike. I called your friend’s home, Mr. Yamamura, the one who put you up last night, but his wife said you’d gone out again."

"I got a few hours’ sleep in the morning," he explained, "but then I woke up and wasn’t able to sit still. The police said they were through with my apartment. For the time being, at least. And they had, well, cleaned it up. I’d just come in, as a matter of fact, when you rang."

"I did it on an off chance. I didn’t really think you—" The girl shivered.

"It’s no worse for me, right now, than any other place." Though I will sleep on the couch in my living room, and I expect I’ll move out next week. Idiotic of me, yes, conceded, but the fact remains that flat is where I kicked a human head like a football. Quickly, Stefanik said: "I wish you’d taken Trig up on his offer of a doss, too. He has lots of room."

"By the time I’d been questioned and—everything—I was so exhausted it didn’t matter where I was. I kept falling asleep in my chair, toward the end. So they drove me back to the hotel. I think I must have asked them to but I don’t remember. But waking up there this morning— No, that’s enough!"

"And more police questions after breakfast, and reporters?" he asked. She nodded dumbly. He took her hand and she clung to his grip with cold straining fingers. "Me too," he said out of a dull hope that shared misery might be less. "But it was so much worse for you, Janice. . . . Don’t be alone tonight!"

"I won’t," she said, carefully calm again. "Nerissa Linden got in touch with me and invited me to stay with them. I’ll do that. For the next few days. Maybe." They had been walking as she spoke, and now entered the living room. She released his hand and brushed fingers across a bouquet of roses. "Aren’t these nice? Nerissa sent them."

"I’m sorry," he said. "I forgot any such gesture."
Janice braced herself and met his gaze levelly. "I'd think less of you if you had remembered, Mike. Let's not be hypocrical."

He fumbled out his cigarettes. She accepted one, choked on it, snatched it from her lips and ground it out in an ash tray. "No," she said. "That's all done with."

Stefanik comforted himself with smoke, having no words. Janice began to prowl the room, touching things as she passed them, her eyes unrestful and her tone feverish:

"Why should I mourn what Arthur and I once had? It was already past. A few more weeks, and I probably would have left him, in spite of everything. There was nothing that remained of the man I thought I'd married. And when you told me the other day, what he had—had been trying to do to you—I wasn't really surprised. There was a kind of awful inevitability about it. When it actually took place, when he tried to kill someone, you, that hurt. I hadn't imagined how it would hurt. But somewhere down underneath, I wasn't surprised. I'd been expecting some such outcome. . . . And yet that wasn't Arthur. Not my Arthur. I could almost believe in possession by demons. What made him do it?"

Unbidden, it whispered in Stefanik's skull: He took in his hand the sword of Muramasa. He choked the fantasy off.

"That's why I kept hanging on," said Janice. "I kept expecting he would get better, he was only sick, the man I cared for was locked away underneath. But—I told you once, Mike—it became too much. I stopped even wanting the old Arthur back. It was just that I—I couldn't desert him. Could I? Could I? And now he's dead. Murdered. By whom? For what? He's dead, and he never had a chance to be happy again! That's what we should cry about, Mike. Not me. For myself, I only feel kind of stunned. I haven't really understood it yet, from my own viewpoint, what it means. But Arthur was so much once—and now he's dead, and the dead are so little—it isn't right!"
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;
And how his audit stands, who knows save heaven?
But in our circumstance and course of thought,
'Tis heavy with him—

Stefanik asked slowly: “Why did you return here at all, Janice?”

“For the same reason I wanted you to come.” She must fight to pronounce her thought. “I couldn’t bring myself to search alone. But between us— Where did he hide the sword, Mike? Somewhere in this house?”

Stefanik felt brambles along his backbone. “It isn’t here now,” he answered. “The sword killed him.”

“But traces—” Swiftly: “And why did he hunt you, and spy on you, why did he hate you, Mike? He hated all the world, toward the last, but what drove him against you?”

Still he could not smear his mouth with the wretched, sniggering tale that had gone behind their backs. Not here, not now. He said out of an emptiness: “Do you really believe we might find some clue?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head in a blind, hurt fashion. “There could be something that I might recognize, that wouldn’t mean anything to anyone else. I might find it by accident, when I start preparing to move away. And I don’t know if I could bear to be alone then.”

He thought: The sword may be lying in some black corner, with Culquhoun’s blood on it. Yes. I understand, Janice, darling.

“Okay,” he said, as banally as possible. “You take the lead and we’ll check room by room.”

The tension between them eased a little with the common-placeness of opening drawers. After an hour or so, when the doorbell rang, Janice read the telegram handed her and said almost matter-of-factly: “Regrets from Rhea Deacon. She just heard the news.”
“Oh. Oh, yes, she’s visiting in Philadelphia, isn’t she?” said Stefanik. “You were out with her, Sunday night, was it?”

“Yes, when Keith couldn’t make it at the last minute. Poor Rhea. She wasn’t much interested in that trip. But Keith gave it to her, suddenly, as a surprise, and she didn’t want to hurt his feelings. She adores him.” Janice’s smile faded, as she sensed the stiffness in the man. “What’s wrong, Mike?”

“I wonder why he sent her off. Just like that.”

“Why—a surprise! I told you!” Janice looked away. In the cold cloudy light from a window, he saw how she flushed. “An un-birthday present. Come on, let’s get back to work.”

He caught her wrist. “No, wait,” he said. “You know something.”

“It isn’t important. Let go!” Anger edged her voice.

“Are you sure it isn’t?” Stefanik saw horror in her, but forced himself on: “Nobody knows who killed Art, or why. Anything could be a clue.”

“Not this. Not about Keith!” She stamped her foot. “Forget it before I slap you!”

“I’m sorry,” he said in desolation. “That’s the worst part of these crimes by stealth, murder, treason; your dearest friend could have done them. Why did Keith send his wife away?”

“I don’t want to say it, that’s all,” she mumbled. “It’s a lot of foul gossip. It didn’t even cross my mind till you acted so suspicious.”

“Wait. I think I’ve heard those rumors too. Other women?”

“Hired women, now and then. They say. Arthur mentioned it to me once. That was not long after we’d been married, he thought it was a pity that his old friend Keith had to resort to—I’ve heard it said by others, also. I won’t believe it, though. It isn’t fair to believe it!”

*I wonder if there is more truth to this story than to the one about us, my dear,* thought Stefanik.

A wisp of memory touched him. Something he had heard,
this incident reminded. . . . He hunted it through byways of awareness, while Janice talked too brightly of things too inconsequential and they continued their task. And, finally, he pounced on it.

"Janice," he asked, "remember when Gregory Ionescu got thrown out of this house? Do you remember what he had said? What exactly did touch off such a rage?"

"I don't recall. I think we were talking about, yes, he was trying to compare us nowadays with Carthage, and Russia was supposed to be like Rome, the same tedious virtues. Something like that." Janice's slim hands clenched on the papers she was riffling through. "Please, let's not talk about it."

He yielded, but his recollection of Ionescu in the Howl (only last night?) and the slander he had headed off, remained like a wound. While at the desk, he stole a chance to check the boy's residence in an address book.

He wanted very much to ask him some questions.

Janice led the way back through her house. The kitchen opened on a small rear porch, which overlooked a large garden of flowering shrubs. A flagged path ran to a public driveway bisecting this block at the edge of the property. Stefanik searched the area with care.

"No sign," he concluded. "Though I suppose a trained eye might see what mine passes over."

"We've done enough," she said. "I needn't fear stumbling across anything." Unexpectedly, she yawned. "Oh, Lord, how tired I am!"

"Do you think you could take a nap?" he asked. "I'll drive you around to Lindens'."

"No. I can't very well go there till this evening. Nerissa has to take one of their kids to the dentist, and promised him to eat out by way of compensation." Janice's lids drooped. "It's all right, Mike. I can rest here as well as anywhere. Honest. And afterward I still have that hired car."
He thought of Ionescu. And he remembered the plainclothesman, patient outside. "Okay," he said. "I do have some errands of my own. If you, uh, need anything, I'll be at home later today."

She stroked her hand across the back of his. "Thanks, Mike. You're a prince. I wish I could think of something more original to say, but they haven't made the right words yet. Thanks."

He left her with the heart jumping in him.

The sight of the trailing automobile in his rearview mirror brought back soberness. That police officer last night, who had told him he'd better dig up some witnesses to his whereabouts; the looks that went between the reporters who interviewed him; the newspaper accounts themselves, which he had been morbidly driven to read: he couldn't quite believe that Michael Stefanik might be chemically garroted for murder, such things happened to unreal people in other places, but he felt pressure upon him.

Ionescu lived in a rooming house near the campus. Stefanik knocked on the door indicated by a hand-scrawled directory, and heard the "Come in" which he hadn't quite dared expect.

Ionescu lay flopped on an unmade bed in a stale fog of smoke. The floor was dusty where clothes and heaped books didn't cover it. The walls were nearly solid with pinned-up clippings, pictures, notes, printed injunctions to think and smile, whatever had caught his fancy. A battered portable hi-fi played flamenco. A typewriter on a table held a sheet of paper; Stefanik, a fast reader, happened to pass eyes across it and saw—for let the soldiers return to all the graves they want, I am a saintly soul content with my wilderness, I mean the one within me which is me, dig, and I am proud to be a little boy scribbling dirty words on the fence since I don't like any of your smug fences, BUT (Jimmy died out) this has its limits too. He supposed it was the novel.
“Hi,” waved Ionescu. “Pull up a something and sit down. I'd offer you a drink, but I'm busted again.”

Stefanik removed some magazines from a chair and lowered himself. “Am I disturbing you?” he asked inanely.

“Oh, no. I was only listening to the record. Though there isn't much 'only' about it. I mean, man, dig that guitar! It is the very, very most, hey? What can I do you for?”

The casualness was like a blow. For a moment Stefanik thought time had slipped a cog and he had fallen into some world-of-if where death had no dominion. He struggled toward understanding. “Have you been out today?” he inquired.

“No. Didn't wake up till about noon, and haven't a nickel for food, so I thought I might as well stay home till evening.” Ionescu sat up on his elbows. “Say, how about letting me have five? I'll give it back to you when I get paid.”

“When is that?”

“I'm almost desperate enough to go scrounge another job,” grinned Ionescu, “so it'll probably be in about two weeks.”

Stefanik checked a sarcastic answer. He was here because he needed information. The fact that Ionescu was unaware of Culquhoun's murder could be turned to advantage—somehow—His brain still felt sodden from weariness, childishly devoting itself to no more than the slight ache in his injured arm. He forced it to move.

“Quid pro quo,” he said. “I'll give you the money for some help.” Might as well call it an outright wage; he'd never see a loan again anyway.

Ionescu controlled a flash of eagerness. “Within reason,” he said.

“I merely want to know something.” Stefanik rubbed his forehead. This would have to sound plausible, and yet he didn't want to speak too plainly. Ionescu had no right to hear the pain of his betters. “You remember we talked about Arthur Culquhoun last night? Well, you may know I have some—some
business relationship with him. I need to know a little more about his character and— Anyhow, that night recently when he blew his stack and threw you out of the house. Have you any idea why? What did you say that provoked him?”

“Hell, I wasn’t even talking to him,” said Ionescu. “I was talking to Janice. Something about, lemme think, yeah, I was on this history kick, all about Hannibal being saddled with a government that believed in federal economy. I think, lemme see, I made some crack about probably the wives then were no better than the wives now, and who could blame ’em, they had the same stolid businessman-husbands as girls nowadays. I guess he overheard me, or maybe he’d been listening all the time. That was when he jumped up and screamed at me to get out.”

“Ah, so.” So the tales about Janice definitely had reached Culquhoun. Stefanik thought of her alone with a man so huge and raging, and clenched fists at the thought of what might have happened.

“Which proves he knew after all,” said Ionescu.

“What?” Stefanik asked vaguely.

“About Janice and her lover.”

“Hey!” Stefanik half rose.

Ionescu raised his palms. “Take it easy, Galahad. I don’t care what she does with her body. I mean, she’s her own property, like. ’Course,” he added, seeing the anger that still twisted Stefanik’s face, “I admit I was surprised. I hadn’t thought she was the type.”

“What? You hadn’t heard—” Stefanik’s voice trailed off.

Ionescu’s eyes glittered. “Oh, ho! So there were such rumors! But no, I hadn’t heard them. I didn’t exactly move in her circles after she got married. Christ, what a shame she did! To him, anyhow. The potential in that girl!”

Stefanik said roughly, through a tightened throat: “Then what ever gave you the idea?”

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“About her hobby? Why, something Culquhoun bawled. She was hollering at him to let me alone, and I was kind of relaxing and enjoying it, like the old Chinese advice is to women about to be criminally assaulted. He turned around and roared at her, along with some pretty nasty names, ‘I saw you and him through that window Sunday night!’ That startled me enough so I watched her close. But it kind of passed her by, the way a remark will when you’re excited. I guess she didn’t really hear it. She called him eighteen kinds of barbarian. And then he dumped me on the porch and slammed the door.”

“I see.” Stefanik groped through a blackness that gibbered at him.

“Well,” said Ionescu, “have I earned that five-spot?”

Stefanik took out his wallet and handed him a bill, hardly conscious of it. Ionescu kissed his reward in glee and stood up. “We eat!” he laughed. Scratching in his beard, sparrow eyes fixed on Stefanik: “So now you know he does know. Watch out, man. He’s a wild one.”

“What?”

“Culquhoun. Stop corning it about business. You’re her lover. I wondered last night; today you’ve made it as visible as the Campanile. So watch out for that Culquhoun, or I’ll stop envying you. Dig me?”

Stefanik had not known killing fury before now. He caught Ionescu by the arms and shook him till teeth rattled. He heard himself yell: “I’m not! No one is! If you say any more, I’ll take off your head the way Culquhoun’s was! Do you hear? They think I may have done it. By God, if you repeat that filthy gossip about her, I’ll give them a murder. Don’t you understand? It implicates Janice! They’ll hear those lies about her, and think she planned his death!”

He threw the boy to the floor and stamped out.
Yamamura tried several times during the afternoon to get in touch with the Lindens, but the telephone rang vainly. He occupied himself with his skip case, though it seemed he should bend all his brain to finding the sword before it killed once more. Well, maybe the police—if competence and science were of use against devils—Yamamura punished himself for superstition by not calling again till eight in the evening.

A woman's voice answered. He identified himself. "Is this Mrs. Linden?" he went on. "Could I speak to your husband?"

"Is it very urgent?" She hesitated. "He's finally asleep. He had a bad night, I doubt if he slept a wink. And that was after being out, busy, all day yesterday. And today again. The poor guy came in tonight so bushed I thought for a minute he was drunk."

Yamamura considered. An oblique approach might work best at that. "I wonder if I could come out and talk to you, then. All I want is some general background on this case. Most of the people involved are strangers to me."

"Sure. Janice mentioned you. She's here too, also sound asleep. What a pair of lost lambs I've got! As well as the kids, and a colicky dachshund pup. You'll be a positive relief."

He received directions and set forth. The Lindens lived in Walnut Creek, miles on the other side of the Berkeley hills.
Driving through thin night rain, Yamamura wondered what there was in the suburbs worth enslavement to a house and a car. He stopped outside a new-looking place in the Department Store Ranch style and was about to press its bell when Nerissa Linden opened the door for him. "Shhh! I don't want to wake them if we can possibly help it. Poor Roy, he's still twitching and muttering."

She was a small, pert woman, younger than he had expected, with a brown pony tail and a figure superbly sexy in blouse and toreador pants. But she offered him a campaign chair and poured coffee with a hospitable fussiness that reminded him of his grandmother in Stavanger. "I understand you're a private eye, Mr. Yamamura," she said. "If you'll pardon a no doubt disgusting term. I don't believe I've ever met one before. It must be terribly exciting."

"About as much as bricklaying," he answered dryly. "People fall off high walls now and then, you know. I'm only here to gossip. That's the exact word."

"You've come to the right person, then." Her cheerfulness died away, and as she sat down opposite him her china-blue eyes became quite steady. "Who are you working for?"

"Michael Stefanik. You've read the papers; you must be aware that he has to account for himself. But I know he's perfectly innocent."

"That's what Janice said too, the little we discussed it. I think she must be correct. She's a pretty wise girl."

"You can put a comma between 'pretty' and 'wise' if you want," said Yamamura. He was content to let talk proceed naturally, guiding no more than he must. It was the best way of disarming this woman, who bore a certain wariness of him. (On her husband's behalf?) "Exotic type of looks. If I ever get together with the rest of the world's Nippowegian cross-breeds and we establish a samurai Valhalla, she can have the Valkyrie concession any day."
“Of course, her marriage was a bad mistake,” said Nerissa. “But I suppose there was no way for her to know till too late. Roy liked Culquhoun too, at first.” She held out a pack. “Smoke?”

“If you don’t mind a pipe.” Yamamura lit her cigarette and began to stuff his briar. He didn’t really want tobacco, but a man with a pipe is a restful, fatherly object. “I take it you’re good friends with her, Mrs. Linden?”

“Yes. We see each other quite often. Not much the last few weeks, however. She’s been so unhappy. I wonder if she heard those vicious lies.”

“What lies?” Yamamura kept his question unemphasized.

“About her carrying on with Michael Stefanik. I can’t imagine how the rumor ever started. Nobody that knows Janice could believe—it’s not as if some such thing were said about, oh, for instance, Keith Deacon.”

“Why him? He’s quite a solid citizen, isn’t he?”

“You hear stories. They may be true. I mean, he’s kind to his wife, and she thinks the world of him, but she is a dullish sort of person. I wouldn’t be surprised if he sent her East all at once, the way he has, because he wanted a few weeks to”—Nerissa stopped, flushing. “I’m sorry. It’s dreadful of me. I was so indignant about Janice that I just wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s forgotten,” lied Yamamura. Inwardly: *I’ll have to grill Mike in detail about these alleged neo-Babbitts at D & C. They begin to look most interesting.*

“No, but I mean it.” Nerissa’s distress was plain to hear. “I had no right to say such things about anyone. Least of all Keith. He’s one of the nicest people there are.”

Yamamura put down some bait: “I thought he was rather, well, standoffish.”

“Oh, he used to be. Always pleasant, but never really intimate. In the last few months, though, he’s begun coming out
of his shell. Taking an interest in everybody's interests. Even my amateur theatricals. I'm with the Troubadours, and we operate on a baby shoestring, but he attended some of our performances and afterward took me out shopping for costumes, props, everything I could think of—why, he must have bought the theater a hundred dollars' worth of stuff. And then Roy, who is strictly an egghead and has been downright rude sometimes about refusing the Deacons' invitations to bridge parties—Roy had a birthday not long ago, and Keith gave him the most beautiful book. You know the Divine Comedy edition with the Doré illustrations? Keith must have spent weeks, off and on, tracking that down for him."

Or engaged a bookfinder, more likely, thought Yamamura. Still, it was obviously an informed choice, and expensive. Then there's the sword club; he may join it yet.

Aloud: "Why should he start doing such things?"

"I don't know," said Nerissa. "I'd guess, though—no, I won't dwell on that gossip—I'll just guess his wife means well but doesn't really offer him much. And now he's past forty, and maybe realizes how lonesome he's been, and wants to do something about it before too late."

As well as kick over the traces, thought Yamamura. Yeh. The last fling. So he ships his wife off to her folks. Is that all there is to it?

"But what has this got to do with your job?" Nerissa sat bolt upright. "No! You don't think—"

"I have no suspicions," said Yamamura, more or less truthfully. He had plenty of suspicion, and anger and primitive fear, but no focus for them. He thought that perhaps the resulting tension was what really whipped him to end this affair.

"I'm only feeling my way, as I told you," he said. "Trying to learn why Culquhoun was killed in those particular circumstances. That means looking into his past life, associations—"
even the most harmless people might tie in somehow. Oswaldo Pereira, for example, is a friend of mine, but I'd be glad to hear whatever you want to say about him.”

“Nothing that would surprise you, I’m sure. I scarcely know him; we met at a party or two. He seems like a fine old-world type of person. Very cultured, isn’t he?”

“I suppose so,” Yamamura replied. “Would you believe he never went through the third grade of school? He had a rough way to go. I understand that after picking up his first million, he took it easy for a few years so he’d have time to read books. He’s also an ADA-type Democrat, plays violin in an amateur quartet, and used to be a fencing champion.”

“Dear me. All that? You never do know people, do you? Really know them, I mean.”

“I advise you not to brood on the fact,” said Yamamura. “It has too many implications.”

He puffed for a while. Then: “We might as well include your husband, Mrs. Linden. Mind?” She shook her head. “Uh, I gather Culquhoun was from Los Angeles, and you two also lived there. Did you meet him at that time?”

“Oh, no. He’d moved up to this area long before Roy or I even saw L.A. I myself was only there a year. Hollywood ambitions.” She smiled ruefully. “The usual little girl from Iowa with the usual little hometown dramatic successes. Car-hop at a drive-in was as close as I ever got. And by now, I’m not at all sorry.”

“How’d you meet your husband, then?” Yamamura held to a conversational tone. That was enough: most folk need little stimulus to talk about themselves.

“At a party. Mutual friends.” Nerissa chuckled. “Roy was the most determined bachelor I’ve ever met. It took me six months to track that Injun down and get his scalp.”

“These scholarly types are often pretty shy,” agreed Yamamura. “I get the impression he is one.”

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“Graduated from Columbia with honors,” she said proudly, “after fighting all the way from North Africa to Germany. Master’s degree from Wisconsin. He was doing very well in Los Angeles, especially for his first professional job. They hated to see him go. But neither of us liked the city much, so when Keith Deacon started recruiting for D & C, Roy went like a shot.” Sullenness crossed her brow. “I suppose I’m being bad again, speaking ill of the dead, but between us, I’m not at all sorry about Culquhoun. I’ve seen Roy come home shaking with anger, the last few months. He wouldn’t say what it was, he never says much about himself, but I knew. I knew.”

“Don’t misunderstand me,” drawled Yamamura, “but just for the record, where was your husband, the last couple of days?”

“He had business for the firm. Something to check into.” Nerissa’s reply wavered a trifle. “Ask Keith.”

Yamamura thought with a sensation of cold: But Linden told Deacon he would be out on family errands. Somebody’s a liar.

“The police might want to know details,” he said. “Don’t worry: it’ll be for the same reason as me, to eliminate possible clues. So to save bother, could you tell me now where he was?”

“I told you I don’t know!” She spoke shrilly.

Yamamura poured smoke from his mouth. “Could company business worry him to sleeplessness?” he murmured.

“I think you had better go now,” she said.

“I’m not trying to meddle,” Yamamura said. “But don’t you understand, the sooner this is cleared up, the sooner we’ll all be safe? There’s a murderer abroad. Until we’ve learned something about the relationships between all the persons involved, we can’t tell if the murderer is going to stop with Culquhoun. I don’t say he could be anybody.” Though that would be true. “But I do say he could strike at anybody. You have children to think about. Won’t you help me?”

She looked down at her knees. He thought she was trying
not to cry. "I can't tell you anything," she gulped. "I don't know. I honestly don't. Roy never says much. He even maintains a private P.O. box. He told me before we got married, he would—he wasn't free to—I don't know, Mr. Yamamura. I've never even met his family. He's gone out of town before, saying something about business—" Desperately: "He wasn't telling a lie at such times. It's a—a polite way of telling me this is his personal affair. . . . If you knew him, though, the f-f-finest man who—"

"What's goin' on?"

Linden stood in the rear door. Yamamura concluded fleetingly that the engineer must be an antipajama sleeper, for he had simply thrown on Bermuda shorts. Beneath the garment, his skinny calves and large long-heeled feet looked almost comic; but the torso and arms above knotted into hard muscle.

His eyes darted across them. Nerissa rose, awkwardly. "I thought you were asleep, Roy," she faltered.

"Your holler woke me up, couple minutes ago," he said. "I heard a little more, comin' in here." The gaunt Rameses visage congealed. "You got no right, Yamamura. Scram."

The detective flowed erect, laid his pipe in an ash tray and put on a smile. "Did you hear the part about my reasons for asking this?" he said.

"Yeah." Linden jerked a thumb at the door. "Out."

"Roy." Nerissa stole toward him. "Please, Roy."

Yamamura intercepted Linden's look at his wife. Seldom had he seen as great a tenderness. "It's okay, darlin'," Linden breathed. "Everything's goin' to be okay."

"Don't mistake a warning for a threat," said Yamamura. "But you do seem to have gained by Culquhoun's death. And you won't account for your time the day he was murdered. If the police nosed your way, and you kept your mouth shut, you might be in real trouble. Or, at least, they'd start backtracing,
which would embarrass you worse than a confidential talk with an officer.”

Linden sneered. “Who’s gonna put ’em on to me? You?”

Yamamura gauged him a second. “Where were you born?” he asked.

Linden took a stiff-legged step forward. His accent changed and thickened as he shouted: “Get out! Get outta my house, ya bastard! Start running, or God damn me if I don’t kill ya!”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Linden,” said Yamamura. “Can’t you make him see reason? Whatever his trouble is, if he’d let us know—”

Linden shrieked. He must indeed be strung close to breaking, thought Yamamura. He charged the detective with his fingers out like claws.

Yamamura sidestepped. Unexpectedly fast, Linden swiveled and caught the other man’s jacket with his left hand. His right fist came about in a cross toward the jaw. Yamamura moved his left arm in an arc that diverted the blow past his ear. He scythed a foot behind Linden’s ankles, while his right hand pushed on the lean chest. Linden went down in a sitting position, his grasp torn loose.

Yamamura stepped back as Nerissa screamed. “I’m so sorry,” he blurted. “I’ll go right away.”

“You’ll go feet first, ya filthy schtunk!” Linden tore off his glasses, bounced up, and charged. The man seemed out of his head. Yamamura caught the body on his hip and boosted it along. Linden skidded across the hardwood floor, crashed into the wall.

He got up again, foaming, and snatched a vase off a table. “Roy!” The anguish of Nerissa ripped at Yamamura. He guarded himself by his left arm. Linden collided with him and raised the vase. Yamamura held right-hand fingers stiff and jabbed them, exactly perpendicular, into the unclad solar plexus.
Linden turned gray. He folded together and toppled.
Nerissa fled to him, held him close while he gasped for air.
The countenance she lifted to Yamamura was a mask of appeal.
The detective retrieved his pipe. “If this were Japan,” he said humbly, “I’d go down on my face to both of you. I should have known when a man’s on the verge of nervous collapse.”
He turned to go. “Don’t worry about him, ma’am. He’ll get his wind back in a minute. Give him a stiff drink and put him to bed.”

He went out into the rain. It had strengthened a bit; it sluiced over the great dark valley like tears. He thought: I wish to hell I could be sure Linden isn’t the murderer. And again: But must I tell the police? Suppose he isn’t.

The churning in him subsided as he drove back home. There were a few things he could certainly do. Send a wire to a colleague in New York. Call on Stefanik and pump the lad dry, really dry, of everything he knew about those lives Culquhoun had tangled together. Very likely, in view of his restless character, Mike Stefanik had done a little gumshoeing of his own today. Might even have learned a bit that was new. And, of course, it would be well to check with Inspector Harr-ries. . . .

Yamamura remembered his wife wanted some cooking sherry, and stopped in a liquor store. He noticed the news rack carried an extra edition, and looked closer.

Somebody named Gregory Ionescu had gone to the police and admitted murdering Arthur Culquhoun.
Saturday morning was blue again, with small white clouds and sunlight spilling across the hills. But a wind came streaking from the Bay and the ocean beyond. Stefanik pulled up the collar of his topcoat as he walked from his parking spot.

Janice waited already at the place they had agreed on over the telephone, outside City Hall. Its mellow baroque façade, the steep roofs and brave green spire, were a backdrop for her more gracious than the shoebox which an era obsessed with bigness was erecting next door. Her coat and scarf fluttered in the cold hurried air. Sleep had given strength back to her, he saw, but a fresh look of having been stunned was in her eyes and on her mouth. She caught Stefanik's hands and cried aloud: "Why did he do it, Mike?"

"Perhaps he'll tell us," mumbled Stefanik.

"You can't mean he actually— No, that's impossible! Why did he say he'd done it?" Janice took his arm. He continued to watch her. She let go again. "What's the matter, Mike?"

He shook his wide shoulders, as if to be rid of a burden. "Nothing. Come on, this way."

Inside him: What did Culquhoun see, through what window, Sunday night?

And again, wretchedly: When Trig dropped in and wanted to know all I know, why did I tell him that too, with ever-
thing else? I was a little drunk, I must have put away a quart of red wine trying to get sleepy, but nevertheless, why did I join all the whisperers about her, with my story of someone else’s story of a thing her husband had let slip in anger?

But where was she, actually, on Sunday night? And with whom?

Unspeaking, they went behind City Hall to the building which housed Berkeley police headquarters. Inquiry gave them entrance to Harries’ office.

“Yes, we’ve got him right here at the moment,” said the inspector. “You’re welcome to a visit. Maybe you can talk him out of this stunt.”

“Then you don’t think he did it?” The eagerness in Janice was acrid for Stefanik to watch. He cursed himself, that he wondered how many men she would be so anxious about. His bandaged arm began to throb again, wearily.

“Well, Mrs. Culquhoun, I’d better not commit myself,” said Harries. “It’s not a typical confession out of remorse, but neither does it have the earmarks of a crank confession. We get enough of both kinds to recognize them. Ionescu knows what he’s doing. I wish he’d share the knowledge.” He gazed moodily out the window. “I remember one case, even, where the true murderer walked in and made the same cool admission. He had things staged so it’d look as if he were only playing games, and we’d lose interest in him. He forgot a few details, though. So I won’t come right out at this point and say Ionescu is not guilty.”

“But if you’re simply—” began Stefanik.

“Yes. We do think he’s improbable. We’ll continue work on the case, exactly as before.” Harries’ eyes shifted to the man and went bleak. “We’ll get the real killer, never fear.”

“If we can see him,” begged Janice.

“Right this way, then, please. You can use one of the interrogation rooms. The privacy may help.”
It was cramped, with a table and three chairs, opening on a central chamber which several offices also faced. Men went quietly back and forth on their business, someone carried a bulky folder, someone else clicked away on a typewriter. Stefanik knew a sense of having wandered into some unhastening big machine. He must force himself to sit down.

An officer escorted Ionescu to the room, went out and closed the door. Janice started from her chair. "Greg," she stammered. "Greg, what are you doing?"

Ionescu grinned in his beard and swaggered to a seat. "Careful, carissima. We have an audience."

"No, the inspector said—" Janice stopped. One hand stole to her mouth.

"Of course the place is bugged." Ionescu slouched back, his stubby legs extended. "Who's got a cigarette? I don't like the brand I was bumming off that character who questioned me earlier."

Stefanik snorted. "It's an article of faith with your breed, isn't it, the police are dishonest. You'd be read out of the Howl if you denied that."

"Leave him alone!" flared Janice.

Ionescu beckoned. Reluctantly, Stefanik provided him with a smoke and a match. "Don't let's fight," said Ionescu.

"What has happened to you?" whispered Janice.

"It's in all the papers. I strolled in yesterday evening, asked to see somebody working on the Culquhoun case, and told him I killed the guy."

"You didn't!"

"My story is of elegant simplicity. I had nothing to do Thursday, so I thought I'd go for a walk in the hills and stop by your place, Mike. I knew Janice worked for you and I looked up your address in the phone book. There wasn't anybody home, though. I was about to go on when I glimpsed Arthur Culquhoun coming down the path. He was carrying
that toolbox and the sword. I knew already, from the papers, about the burglary at your flat. Now I realized he must have done it. I was afraid of what he might be planning next, so I hid in the trees—he hadn’t seen me—and watched him let himself in. He didn’t close the door behind him, so I sneaked after. He was crouched in the bedroom with his apparatus. The sword was lying sheathed on the floor. He saw me and started to get up. I grabbed the sword and used it. Then I went off with the sword. It’s in the Bay now. Close quote.” Ionescu blew a smoke ring.

“But why, Greg?”

“Impulse. Partly fear, I admit. He was bigger than ought to be legal. But partly, if you’ll allow me a brag, for the good of all. Arthur Culquhoun was a boil on the buttocks of society.”

Janice’s hands locked together. She looked away from him. Stefanik asked carefully: “Why did you give yourself up?”

Ionescu grew quite grave. He spoke straight to the girl: “I learned somebody innocent was suspected.”

She crouched back in her chair, as if terrified. Ionescu smiled at the glowing tip of his own cigarette. “Neither of you have any alibi, and both of you have motive. You’re sitting ducks for some ambitious D.A. and his police chief stooge. But now they’ve got me. Janice, you’ll inherit a stack of money. Why not go down to Mexico and live like a civilized human being?”

Her lips stirred, but no sound came out.

“Wait a minute!” protested Stefanik.

“Suppose, for some reason, they do accuse you,” said Ionescu, lightly again. “Some copper with a one-track mind and no switch engine might keep plugging on the theory that you conspired with—someone else—to kill your husband. You know how such motivations work, I mean in official brains. Jealousy. Prudery. Hate for anyone who doesn’t wear gray flannel camouflage. Well, just suppose this happens. They
might extradite the so-called actual murderer. But not a mere accomplice. Dig me, Janice?"

"What the hell are you implying?" snapped Stefanik.

"That I want another cigarette," said Ionescu. "In fact, I'll accept the whole pack. Thanks. That's the trouble with being a jailbird. No liquor, and damn little tobacco. Next time you come visiting, try to smuggle in a pint. Hm?"

It rattled in Janice's throat: "But Greg, I didn't!"

"Didn't what?"

"C-c-con—conspire—I swear to God I didn't!"

"I never said you did." Ionescu was annoyed. "I only said the fuzz might think so. I've done what I can, and I insist on my right to be tried for murder, but you aren't safe yet." Suddenly, almost frantically: "Make yourself safe, Janice!"

She closed her eyes.

"Are you telling the truth?" asked Stefanik.

"That makes the nine hundred and fourteenth time I've heard that question," said Ionescu. "I've gotten damn' well sick of it. Up to here, man. You might as well go."

"Wait a minute—"

"Blow, I said." Ionescu stood up. "If you want to do something useful, bring me some decent books to read." He opened the door. "I'm through, Dick Tracy."

The officer sighed and led him away.

Janice walked ahead of Stefanik. Her chin quivered, ever so faintly, but she held it high. He slouched after, feeling beaten down by invisible fists.

Harries met them in the hall. "No luck?" he said.

"Same yarn as he handed the papers," replied Stefanik.

"But he thought—" Janice attempted. "He seemed to think—"

"What?" said Harries.

"Nothing." Stefanik took her arm. "She's had a shock." He
hustled her downstairs and out. Harries stood where he was, watching them go.

The wind slapped them as they emerged. "You still have that car?" he asked under its noise.

"Yes. But let's go to the park across the street." Janice winced. "I've seen so many walls."

The fenced-off playground was too merry for them. A few old men were benched around the lawn beyond. Janice continued along the walk to a broad, low-walled concrete semi-circle enclosing the basin of a fountain. Trees roared overhead, autumnnally; and yet the brown hills were greening with the reborn rainy season. Crazy place, this, thought Stefanik through hollowness. Way out.

Janice sat down on one of the benches under the wall. Her hands were jammed into her coat pockets. She stared straight before her.

At last, like a hurt child, she said: "Either he really did it or he thinks I helped to do it."

"He's a born conclusion jumper," said Stefanik.

"But I didn't!" she pleaded. "That afternoon, I walked along the path from Spruce Gate to Lake Anza and back, up in Tilden. I sat a long time, trying to understand that it could be true, what you had told me. I wanted to be alone, that's all."

"Well," said Stefanik, "maybe Ionescu is guilty, then."

"I can't believe it," she said. "Not of him."

"He doesn't seem to have that much nerve," he agreed.

She turned her head to glare bewildered pain. "Let him alone, I told you! Whatever he's done, he tried to help me!" Stefanik retreated into his own grayness.

"It doesn't make sense," said Janice after a while. "It's just happened, meaninglessly. My husband turned against me. Then against you. Then he was killed. Why? There was no reason!"

Stefanik dragged forth: "You don't know yet? In all the questionings, everything, you still haven't been told?"
"What?"

"He thought you and I were having an affair."

She sat so still he wondered if she had heard. A flaw of wind came around the wall and across the fountain. Dead leaves scrittered over the paving. A cloud hid the sun, and passed away, and brilliant heatless light cataracted back.

Finally she said, "Things can't get any more horrible now."

"The stories reached him—I don't know when, probably a few weeks ago," said Stefanik. "That must have been when he started going to pieces."

She nodded in a dazed fashion. "It could be. He wouldn't have come right out and talked to me about it, accused me even. He was so secretive in those last months. But he took his doubts out on me. Yes. He found ways."

"What did he see you doing, Sunday night?"

The question was out before Stefanik realized. He held himself unstirring then, committed to he dared not guess what. His eyes followed the whirling papery flocks of leaves.

"Sunday?" She looked blank. "What was I doing then? I don't remember."

"You said you were in San Francisco with Mrs. Deacon."

"Oh, yes. So I was."

"Your husband saw something else. That must be the reason he stayed away from home all Sunday night."

"What are you talking about?"

"I wish to Christ I knew," he said in his misery.

"What ever— I mean, you and me, Mike—and then this thing about Sunday night— Rhea was with me!"

"She went to Philadelphia the very next morning." Stefanik wrenched his head around toward her. He saw a face gone fluid with incomprehension, and a far part of him wondered how much of an actress Janice might be. He got out through his teeth: "There's something you haven't told. Isn't there?"

She sprang to her feet. "Do you believe that?" she shouted.
"How can I believe you? Those stories about the sword, your almost being killed—What proof have you, besides your own bare word?"

He rose too, shaken, and said through the wind: "Janice, be the truth what it may, I only wanted to warn you. Whatever you may have done—"

"Or you!" She whirled. "How do I know you aren't the murderer?"

She fled down the walk. He took a few steps after her. "Janice!" he called. "I never meant—" She didn't seem to hear. He stopped, then, and watched her running from him.
Yamamura called Deacon's home late in the morning. "Remember that timetable of your recent movements I asked for?" he said. "I wondered if you had it ready yet."

"I have," answered Deacon. "Do you think I should offer the police a copy, as long as they're here?"

"Hm?"

"A couple of officers have been searching the place, with my permission. Though not, I quail to say, the housekeeper's. Ionescu or no, they're checking the homes of all concerned, looking for that sword."

"But why you? You're pretty well out of it."

"Not quite. After all, I was the closest thing to an intimate friend that Arthur Culquhoun had. He might have, oh, stowed the weapon in my cellar. Or perhaps his murderer has. You never know." Deacon paused. "Are you extremely busy?"

"Depends on what you call busy."

"Would you care to have lunch? I'd like to discuss this matter. You were right yesterday, we do need an expert without official commitments."

Yamamura argued it with himself. "Thanks, I will," he decided, "if you'll do me a favor. Call Roy Linden's place and find out if he's home today. If not, does his wife know where he is? And—uh—maybe you could sound her out, how distressed she is."
“What on earth? . . . Well okay. But I’ll expect you to tell me why!”

“At lunch. For now, let’s just say I made myself unpopular out there. See you.”

Yamamura hung up, looked out at the bright day and swore. He and his wife had tickets for the football game. A detective’s lot is not a happy one. He dialed police headquarters and got through to Harries.

“What’s with this Ionescu character?” he asked.

“God knows, and isn’t telling,” groaned the inspector. “I don’t believe his story, but we haven’t really shaken it. I’ve had men swarming through the usual beatnik joints, trying to find someone who saw him elsewhere on Thursday, but no response. That crowd doesn’t like us. They never give much outright trouble, but they don’t cooperate either.”

“They’re agin authority,” said Yamamura. “Which is not a bad idea in itself, provided you pick a suitable authority to be agin. In this case, you aren’t. About Ionescu, though. What’s wrong with his yarn? I never yet found a newspaper that didn’t garble its facts somehow.”

“He claims it was an impulsive murder. But he doesn’t act like the impulsively violent type, and he has no police record, as they usually do.”

“Split personality?”

“I doubt it, though we’ll call in a psychiatrist. Meanwhile, we can’t laugh him off as a prankster. He’s not that type either. He’s got some reason for this confession.”

“I gather you’re carrying on as if this hadn’t arisen.”

“Right. Looking into all of Culquhoun’s associates. That’s not too hard; he was a surly bastard and didn’t know many people. Everybody at his place of work is alibied, except one man by the name of Linden. His neighbors seem about as harmless as you can get. Which leaves—uh—Oswaldo Pereira, a silly thought—though I’ve seen sillier ones turn out to be
correct. And the wife and your boy Stefanik. Our lab man cut himself so badly on one of those other swords he was checking, that he swears the murder weapon must have been sharp enough for a woman to do the job. But between us, Trig, right now Stefanik seems the likeliest suspect. If I were you, I'd be checking every inch of the highway he says he traveled, hoping for a witness.”

“The papers and the regular police ought to flush any there are,” said Yamamura shortly. “I'll stay here.”

“So what have you turned up?”

Yamamura glanced at the telegram lying on his desk. “I'm not sure,” he said.

“About what?”

“Let it ride a while. I'm on some kind of trail, but it might leave me up that famous tributary with no means of propulsion.”

“I'm the judge of that,” snapped Harries. “You can't protect a killer simply because you think the victim had it coming.”

“Oh, never fear.” Yamamura went moody. “Not this time. Whoever it is you're after, he's as vicious as any I've encountered, and I hope to every god in sight you find him before he kills again.” Returning to casualness: “Why not book the whole Eastbay and make sure?”

He hung up on an indignant sputter and pondered who should use his seat at the game. Having gotten in touch with a fellow alumnus possessed of good stout vocal cords, he drove around to deliver the ticket. By then it was approaching twelve. He rolled through several miles of city to Piedmont. Keith Deacon must indeed anticipate wealth to have bought a house in that section. The cars parked in his street were all as long as a bad year; Yamamura snuggled the Volkswagen between them and got out.

Deacon himself opened the front door. “Ah, come in.” He wore a brown business suit, but didn’t seem to mind Yama-
mura's yellow shirt, blue sweater, and white slacks. His hand-
clap was cordial. "Lunch will be ready soon. How about a
drink?"

"Well—beer if you have it, thanks." Yamamura followed
him into a wide living room. They sat down. A maid pattered
in and Deacon ordered, "Martini and a bottle of Heineken's."

"Police all through with you?" inquired Yamamura.

"Yes. They didn't turn up anything. Thorough fellows,
though. Looked behind every bookshelf. Went through every
trunk and drawer. Sifted the incinerator and asked about the
remnants of a ruined sports jacket I'd burned. Examined my
wood ax with a magnifying glass, as if that poor old thing
could chop butter. I must say, speaking as a taxpayer, I got
my money's worth. But I'm afraid Maria's soufflé won't be quite
up to her usual standard. She thinks a man's home is her
castle." Deacon reached into his coat and drew out a folded
sheet of paper. "Here's my log, as well as I could reconstruct
it. Though it isn't possible to account for every hour, after the
lapse of days."

"No. When I think how much of our lives we forget, all the
time, I wonder why people are afraid of dying." Yamamura
opened the paper. "Hm, let's see. Working all last week, at
home every night with your wife except one evening at a
bridge party. Saturday, golf, a nap, entertaining friends after
supper. Sunday, church, and then it gets interesting. Culqu-
houn dropped in about midday. What did he want?"

"I thought I told you before," said Deacon. "Business dis-
cussion. He was—I hate to bring this up now he's dead, but I
guess I have to—he was letting his work go to pot, the last
few weeks. And it was so maddeningly near the end. He had
done all the fundamental research on the Tomek process,
roughed out a prototype design: any good engineer could take
it from there. I asked him if that was what he wanted. He said
no. We argued for a while, not in an unfriendly way. He usu-
ally exempted me from his hostility; I do have some little gift for getting along with people. Anyhow, he returned home after an hour or so. I came out of my study long enough to have lunch with my wife, then popped back in again. A lot of paper work I'd hoped to finish Saturday but didn't, and had to get done by Monday. So Art and I had agreed that Janice should go out to dinner with my wife, use my ticket to the show."

"Hm," said Yamamura. "Can anyone corroborate that you were home Sunday evening?"

"No. The servants don't live in. I was alone till Rhea came back. Does it matter?"

"It matters where Janice was."

"What?" Deacon blinked. "I told you. In San Francisco with Rhea."

"Her husband seemed to think otherwise," said Yamamura. "Why, Art must have been crazy." Deacon clipped his mouth shut. He reddened. "Forgive me. What a thing to say."

"The point is of some importance," said Yamamura. "If Janice really did ditch your wife—"

"But she didn't!" insisted Deacon. "Rhea would have mentioned it to me when she got home."

The maid brought the drinks. Yamamura hoisted his beer with a pleasure dimmed by the worry in him. "Could she have been mistaken or bamboozled?" he pursued. "Something Sunday night affected Culquhoun in a terrible way. Pushed him off the edge. He himself apparently thought Janice was involved."

Deacon frowned a moment, then his face cleared. "Would you like to talk to my wife? It's a safe bet she'll be at her family's house right now. They like their afternoon tea."

"If it isn't too much trouble—"

"The hell with trouble. And expense. Art was my friend." Deacon reached for the telephone.
Yamamura studied the timetable further. Deacon had seen his wife off at the airport about eight Monday morning, then gone straight to the lab and worked all day. The rest of his week was equally well accounted for, the unwitnessed gaps at times when nothing much had been happening anyhow. It seemed barren of leads, though. Unless the wife—With half an ear, Yamamura heard the person-to-person call go through, a few routine endearments, and: “There’s a detective here who wants some information. It might help solve Art’s death.”

Yamamura accepted the receiver. “Mrs. Deacon?” He heard assent. “Sorry to bother you. We, uh, we’re verifying what people were doing around the time of the murder. I was told you were out to dinner and a play with Mrs. Culquhoun on Sunday night.”

“Yes,” said the tiny voice in his ear. “Yes, we were. I picked her up at her house in my personal car, five-thirty I think it was, and we drove across and ate at—”

“Never mind details, thanks. Were you with her all the time?”

“Yes. Till well after midnight. When I took her home, she invited me in for a nightcap. We saw her husband had gone out, and she couldn’t understand why. The poor girl, she was so unhappy, even frightened for him. I think he could at least have left a note, don’t you?”

“Yes. Sure. That’s all, then. Thanks a lot.” Yamamura handed the phone back to Deacon, who said goodbye and hung up.

“Well?” challenged Deacon.

“Exactly,” said Yamamura. “But what did Culquhoun see, and where?”

“How did you learn about this?” asked Deacon. His pale eyes grew alert. “Art never told me. Are you certain?”

“My information traces back to Gregory Ionescu.” Yamamura peered at sunlight through his raised glass. Bubbles
streamed elfin upward. "Not the most reliable source in the world, I grant you."

"Ah, we're finally getting to him," said Deacon. "I'm a systematic person, one thing at a time, but I must admit this discussion seemed rather pointless. Ionescu is the main reason I asked you here."

"You want to know if I think he did it?"

"I know very well he did not," said Deacon. "It's some adolescent game. He can put his name in headlines, and make the police run in circles, while he gloats. An easy way to feel superior. He'll get a few weeks in jail for obstructing justice, and be a hero in his crowd."

"There's more than a practical joke behind his confession," said Yamamura, remembering all he had learned from the exhaustive account dragged out of Stefanik last night.

Deacon's expression hardened. "He might be shielding the murderer on purpose," he said. "Till the killer's tracks are covered. Then Gregory Ionescu will be quick enough to produce a witness who was with him Thursday. Or even if it isn't deliberate, the effect is the same. I'm not going to tolerate that. I want Art's murderer arrested."

Yeh, thought Yamamura. Quite apart from any good you saw in Culquhoun, which escaped the notice of the rest of the world, he was the backbone of your company, wasn't he? What's going to become of D & C now? I can sympathize with your irritation. Chill again: Myself, I'm more interested in finding the sword. Fast.

He compelled himself to speak normally. "Are you certain Ionescu isn't the man?"

"I suppose he could be," said Deacon in a grudging tone. "If so, I want it well proved. But do you believe he is?"

"I'm skeptical."

"So—I've checked on you, Mr. Yamamura. Your reputation
is good. I'd like to engage you. First, to prove Ionescu's innocence, assuming he is. Just to get rid of that red herring. Then, if the regular police haven't found the real murderer, work on that as long as necessary." Deacon watched Yamamura over the rim of his martini glass. "I'm not stingy in such matters. It'll be worth your while."

"You needn't bother, thanks. I'm already doing what I can."

"But on Stefanik's behalf. I don't say you would, ah, conceal evidence. But wouldn't you feel freer if you weren't committed to any potential suspect?"

"As far as I'm concerned," said Yamamura, "Mike Stefanik is not a suspect."

"Well, I hope you're right." Deacon leaned back in his armchair, smiling. "My offer will stay open if you should change your mind. Now, you owe me something."

"What? Oh, yes, about Linden. Did you check?"

"I called," nodded Deacon. "He was out again. His wife said he'd told her not to expect him back till all hours, but that he would be home tomorrow. She sounded pretty miserable. So, what's the reason for your curiosity?"

"Same as the police, who're also beginning to think he should be investigated. He has motive and no alibi."

"Not too good a motive, I'd say. Art did grate him, quite a lot recently, and did stand in the way of his professional advancement. But Linden's a fine engineer. If he didn't think he had bright prospects with us, he could have quit and gotten another job."

"Murder isn't entirely a rational crime," said Yamamura. "Ever."

"What happened yesterday?"

"I went around to his place. He was asleep, but I talked with his wife. She herself doesn't know what he's been up to. He woke, overheard some of the conversation, blew a gasket and got so violent I had to use judo on him."
Deacon whistled.

“The obvious explanation,” said Yamamura, “is that he’s keeping a mistress.” He saw Deacon flinch a little, and recollected what they said about his host. “But that doesn’t feel any truer than Ionescu’s story.”

“No,” concurred Deacon.

He tossed off his martini and stared at the glass, as if in a trance, for minutes. Yamamura, never a compulsive conversationalist, gave attention to his beer. The maid announced lunch. Deacon yanked himself back to reality and smiled once more. “No further business,” he decreed. “As regards this case, anyhow. I’d love to hear you discuss your profession in general.”

“Shop talk?” Yamamura raised his brows.

“And what’s wrong with that? There isn’t a more fascinating thing in existence than to hear intelligent men argue the subjects they know best.”

It proved to be an enjoyable hour. Yamamura was quite sincere when he said at last, “I wish I didn’t have to go.”

“Must you?” said Deacon.

“Duty calls.” Yamamura stubbed out the excellent cigar he had been given and rose. “I always imagine duty as having a rather hard, shrill voice, don’t you?”
He continued across the Bay Bridge to San Francisco. The waters were gray-green, white-spattered; a ship entering the Gate rocked in their unrest. The wind shoved hard at Yamamura's little car and vibrated its metal. But overhead was an enormous blue, and the city towers lifted with a sharpness of outline more natural to mountaintops than the ocean fringe.

Saturday afternoon traffic was light on this side, and Yamamura reached Nob Hill in minutes. He left the Volkswagen below an appalling skyward swoop of street and walked on to the elegance where Pereira lived. He had called ahead; the financier was there to admit him, but in riding clothes. "I hope this won't take long, Trig. It's such a beautiful day, I'd like to get in a couple of hours on a bridle path."

"I knew a flagellant once," said Yamamura. "Some people have the damnedest notions of fun."

He followed the other into the living room. Pereira handed him a sheet of paper, less fussily arranged into columns than the one Deacon had prepared. "My timetable, such as it is. But I could have mailed it to you."

"I might have a question or three to ask. Let's see, now." Yamamura folded himself into a chair. Pereira took the couch and lit a somewhat impatient cigarette.
“Mmmm.” Yamamura scanned the copperplate writing. “Last week seems pretty well covered. Sunday you went to Mass with some friends, played at a chess club all afternoon, and had us sword collectors over in the evening; so that’s a duly alibied day. Monday and Tuesday at the office, but you say you went for a long walk both nights. Any corroboration?”

Pereira shrugged. “Improbable. I was only another face in the crowd along Grant Street, the first night, and I chose some solitary ways in the waterfront area Tuesday. I like simply being in my city.”

“You could get in trouble,” Yamamura warned. “There are some tough sections near the docks.”

Pereira grinned. “I wouldn’t mind handing a gunman the few dollars I carry. As for direct physical assault, I also carry a well-balanced stick with a tapered ferrule.”

“And you’re a fencer. Yeh.” Yamamura reminded himself that Stefanik had been attacked with a sword on Monday and again on Tuesday night.

He turned eyes back to the paper. “Wednesday looks pretty full,” he said. “A board meeting in the forenoon, a business lunch—God, what a loathsome custom! Even galley slaves didn’t have to row while they ate. All afternoon, a series of conferences. In the evening, a meeting of—what’s this, now? Oh, yes, that civic improvement committee—a meeting which lasted late. You can account for Wednesday, all right!”

“The trouble is,” said Pereira, “the murder was committed on Thursday.”

“Uh-huh. That’s when you were scuttling around the East-bay. And according to this, you were right in Berkeley at three o’clock. Didn’t come home till fairly late, and went directly to bed.”

“I don’t know what anyone believes I could gain by Culquhoun’s death. I admit to not liking the man, but without him D & C is finished as an independent company.”
"With him your partnership was doomed anyway, wasn't it? Now he's dead you can still, at the very least, withdraw your investment. But also, you might talk Deacon into merging with some bigger outfit, to your own profit."

"I hardly think Keith will agree," said Pereira, "and he now has the final say in all matters. He's a strange man; he plans elaborately, but takes big risks. Such as reviving D & C in the first place, or making Culquhoun a partner, or concentrating so much valuable effort on the Tomek process, or even giving his wife grounds for divorce, alienating her influential family, if she found out— No, sorry, I didn't mean to air dirty linen." Pereira leaned forward. "Tell me, why don't you think Ionescu is guilty?"

"Don't I?"

"You're still checking on me, aren't you?"

Yamamura chuckled. "Right." Not altogether sincerely: "You realize, in your case, all I hope for is some clue to the actual killer."

"Whom I probably know, if it isn't Ionescu. A hideous thought. Haven't you any idea, Trig? I want this witches' Sabbath ended!"

Yamamura looked out across the city, to Coit Tower on Telegraph Hill, white cenotaph for all the ships which had once been awaited. "Me too," he said. After a time: "How well do you know Janice Culquhoun?"

"Not as well as I think I'd like to," answered Pereira.

"How's that? You were prepared to believe she was cheating her husband."

"True. But when you showed me that she wasn't doing so, I thought back. I realize what a hell of a life she must have had lately, and yet she had never complained to anyone. And she hadn't broken under it, either. I call that gallant."

"But might she have killed her husband?"

"It's possible, I suppose. A spirited person, the last outrage
of many, the sudden impulse— And afterward she would see no reason for confessing it, unless some innocent party were in serious danger.” Pereira spread his hands. “However, I don’t believe all this. She might kill in anger, but I feel she certainly would not skulk about with a sword beforehand, cutting at people in the dark.”

“You mean those attempts on Mike? What do you think was behind them?”

“Why, the murderer! Who else?”

“But Mike’s enemy let himself into the apartment with a key. Who had such a key, except Janice? It got lost, she claims—” Yamamura’s argument was cut off as if by an ax. Pereira saw him, not stiffen, but relax totally, so that dark slitted eyes filmed over and the long body almost slid from the chair.

“What is it?” exclaimed Pereira.

Yamamura didn’t reply. Pereira watched him for an entire minute, then rose to pace the room in unease. The single noise was the scuff of his feet on the carpet. The world in the window began to seem pale and remote.

Finally Yamamura’s mouth firmed. He sat up and reached for his pipe. “Excuse me,” he said in a flat voice. “I was thinking.”

“I should hope so,” Pereira responded. “It seemed as if you had invented a new kind of epilepsy.” He laughed, but it sounded tinny in the silence.

Yamamura fetched out his tobacco pouch. “What do you know about Roy Linden?” he asked, still toneless. Nor did his face hold any expression.

“Why—” Pereira leaned against the mantel and sucked smoke into his lungs. “He’s been with D & C for close to four years, longer than I. A very competent man, with a captivating wife. Polite, but sardonic and rather short-tempered. Extremely nervous under a rigidly controlled surface, I believe.”
“How about his background?”

“He worked for a development corporation in Los Angeles before coming here. Has an M.S. degree from some Midwestern university. Originally from, let me think, yes, Oklahoma. That’s nearly all I could tell you. He’s reticent about himself, d’you know.”

Yamamura said slowly, “Are you aware he was out of sight Thursday, again Friday—and today, for that matter? That he went berserk and attacked me yesterday night when I tried to find out about it? That he was not born in Oklahoma as he claims?”

“What?” Pereira turned from the fireplace, made a stride toward his guest, and stopped.

“I wired a guy I know in New York. We do mutual backscratching. At my request, he checked the records. Not too easy on Saturday, but he has wires he can pull. I got his reply this morning. Roy Frayne Linden was born September fifth, 1923, in Manhattan, on 116th Street near Madison Avenue.”

“What the devil?” said Pereira. “Why should he lie about his birthplace? He’s still an American citizen, isn’t he?” After a silence: “What else has he been hiding?”

Yamamura sighed disappointedly. “Keep your mouth shut, Oswaldo. I only mentioned this to you in the hope of getting some extra insight—perhaps you could—oh, hell, forget it.” He stood up. “You can go to your horse now.”

“Not that fast!” said Pereira. “You can’t run off and leave me dangling.”

“I sure can,” Yamamura told him. “I still have about fifty separate items to check before I dare follow through on what I’ve guessed.”

“But for mercy’s sake, man! If Linden is the killer, loose with the sword—”

“It’s all right, I say!” Yamamura had seldom spoken so unevenly. “The one best thing you can do is go riding and ignore all this. There’s more at stake than catching the murderer.
There are I don’t know how many innocent people involved. I am not going to throw a needless dynamite stick into their lives, hear me?"

Pereira gazed at him. "Very well, Trig. I shall hope you know what you are doing."

Yamamura went out the door. He had started his car before he realized his pipe and tobacco had been left behind.

Well, there were other pipes in his office. He steered back across the bridge. He had mastered himself enough that his mind functioned with machine precision, the conscious part of it detached from any feelings. Farther down in him lay emotion, not triumph or excitement but a deepening tired sadness.

He turned right on the freeway and continued to Oakland's Lake Merritt area. There might be a long hunt ahead of him, but he could start with Vivian Ward, who he remembered lived hereabouts. He stopped at a phone booth and found her name in the book. Doubtless she had another phone whose number was not listed. He put a dime in the box and dialed the official one.

A husky feminine voice said, "Hello. Who's this, please?"
"Trygve Yamamura. We met a couple months ago, the latest time we met, I mean, at Hugo Heiss's place in Marin County."
"Oh, yes. The detective." Suggestively: "What can I do for you, Trig?"
"Let me come up and say hello for a few minutes."
"Sorry, I never see gentlemen in my place. I guess I could meet you somewhere. Though it is pretty early in the day for me."
"This is strictly in the line of my profession, Miss Ward."
"Oh." Caution: "I don't talk about—other people. Never."
"I don't expect you to. All I want is—well, I can explain better face to face."
"All right, then, come on around." She was intrigued enough to be friendly.

He memorized her address and drove on. She turned out to
live in an exclusive apartment hotel overlooking the lake. He rehearsed to himself what she was like. Tall, supple, blonde, with a vivid face and gentle manners. She had been divorced a couple of times, but wasn’t supporting any man at present.

Yamamura was on the side of the bourgeoisie himself, but his work required him to cultivate all things human. Hugo Heiss, for example, was an overfed racketeer with a coprolith for a brain; nonetheless Yamamura stayed on speaking terms with him, even attended some of his parties. It was one way to keep track of the creature and his companions. You could pick up useful hints at such an affair, including what prominent men had found their own quiet uses for Hugo Heiss.

Yamamura also belonged to that class of carnivores who mate for life. But he knew most of the local call girls. Certainly all the expensive ones, such as Vivian Ward, were familiar names to him.

He took an elevator up to her floor and rang the bell. She opened the door. “Come in,” she said.

“I hear a TV,” he managed to smile. “How’s the game going?”

“We’re ahead, six to nothing.” She led him into a room furnished in the latest and starkest mode. She herself wore black lounging pajamas, to set off pale skin and short gold hair with explosive effect. He saw that she possessed a few books and that a very good Hokusai reproduction was on one wall; he remembered that she had talked to him with intelligence as well as charm. And he wondered what had so starved a child of love that the woman would deal in its imitation.

She stretched slim legs on a couch and turned the sound of the football game low. “Care for a drink?” she asked. “Help yourself from the cabinet.”

“No, thanks.” Yamamura found a chair. “You got a haircut,” he remarked. “Last time I saw you, it curled down to your shoulders.”

“Got to stay in fashion.” She reached for a cigarette from
a box on the coffee table. Her hand did not move quite smoothly. "What do you want, Trig?"

"You won't tell me the name of anyone who calls you on that unlisted phone, will you?"

"No. I want to remain in business." She put the cigarette to carmine lips and snapped a lighter. "Look, you can't stay long. I have my reputation to think about."

He didn't laugh, knowing how her trade was practiced nowadays. And he could see fear rise within her. "How about telling me who is not a client?" he asked. "No harm in that, is there?"

"What?" Startled, she leaned back. "Who are you working for?"

"I have my own secrets," said Yamamura. He paused, to choose each word. Regarding her with steadiness: "You get some strange requests from time to time, don't you? And you meet some pretty frightening people. I've ways to protect you, Vivian, should it ever be necessary. If you would help me with a single frank word, I could guard you till we took one horror off your back, at least. The one I'm trailing."

"I don't know what you mean." A pulse began to flutter, low in her throat.

"A single question, then. Not the one I'd most like to ask. Though if you should change your mind, I'll be in my office till after dark."

She sat up straight. "Speak your piece and get out!" she snapped.

"Okay. Is Roy Linden not a, uh, friend of yours?"

"Linden?" She relaxed with a faint gasp. The mobile face, still pale under its make-up, shifted to brief honest puzzlement. "I never heard the name."

Yamamura described the engineer. She shook her head. Relief glowed from her; she must feel certain she had misunderstood her visitor's intent.

"Never met anybody like that, under any monicker."
“Good enough.” Yamamura rose. “I’ll go away now. Thanks.” He paused at the door. “You realize this was also a confidential service,” he added.

Panic flickered again. She nodded hastily. He left.

He had not really awaited success at his first try. There were many possibilities, Vivian Ward simply the most obvious. He might not have found the girl he wanted at all—and it would probably not have been essential to his quest. But what he had learned strengthened the spoor he was following. And he had been fortunate enough to learn it early in the day, with plenty of time left for the next move. And Cal was leading at the stadium. He should have exulted, but the cold foreboding waxed within him.

At the drugstore in Berkeley he bought a tin of tobacco, went upstairs and charged the biggest pipe on his desk. The office seemed bare and barren, with only himself there. He called home and told the babysitter to inform his wife he wouldn’t get back till some unpredictable late hour.

A while he studied the timetables given him, and ran through what he had seen and been told. His campaign sketched itself. He spread out a city map and opened his various directories: phone numbers by name, address, and business. First, probably, a check with one of Culquhoun’s next-door neighbors. . . .

“Hello, Mr. Larson? This is Lieutenant Cogswell of the police,” said Yamamura blandly. “Sorry to bother you, but I’m checking a lead in this murder case. Do you happen to know if Arthur Culquhoun owned a long folding ladder? . . . No, not a stepladder, one of those collapsible affairs. . . . He did not, eh? Nor a rope ladder, I suppose? . . . No? You’re absolutely certain of this? . . . Good. Thank you.”

Next he located several hardware stores, in the vicinity of both D & C and of the Culquhoun home. The fourth one he tried carried ladders of the type described, and for Lieutenant
Cogswell its manager checked with his records and his clerks. Yes, one had been sold on Thursday morning. Yes, the clerk thought Lieutenant Cogswell's description was like the purchaser, but he couldn't be sure. . . . Well, he did recall it had been a very big man. You're entirely welcome, Lieutenant. Always glad to be of service.

According to yesterday's paper, the microphone had already been traced by the police. Culquhoun had bought it the same morning from an electronics retail house. So far, so good.

Yamamura puffed smog and called the Oakland and San Francisco airports. He found that an overnight plane had come in at the latter from New York, nine thirty-five A.M. Thursday. And a first-class sleeper would depart on the reverse route at ten-fifteen tonight.

His search had gone quicker than expected. Now there remained a tedious process of verifying the timetables by Deacon and Pereira. Yamamura felt obliged to phone as many of the witnesses invoked as possible. His reasoning was based on the assumption that they would all confirm what both men had written. If that was wrong, his identification of the murderer might well be.

He didn't think it was, though.
A few thin clouds in the west were briefly red. Then daylight drained from the sky. Stefanik continued to sit on his couch and look empty-eyed out the window. He had thought on that which troubled him for so many hours that his intelligence had given up and now lay awash with disjointed memories, as if in a drowse. Until finally, like lightning, it came to him that darkness had been just this thick around this house when he arrived home and kicked the sneering head of Arthur Culquhoun.

He started up, snapping after air. He knocked over the floor lamp in his haste, righted it, fumbled for the knob. His heart sickened him with skipped beats. As light burst from the globe, he told himself aloud, “Nonsense. Nonsense. Stop this nonsense.”

He continued through the flat, turning on every light he had. The bedroom door daunted him for a moment. Clamping his teeth together, he opened it, snapped the electric switch, and closed it again. He hurried back to the living room and stared wildly out at the cities. They had become a dragon’s hoard of many-colored radiances. From this vantage point, the nearer span of the Bay Bridge, to Treasure Island, was a burning gold curve; San Francisco glowed beyond. He could find no comfort in the view. When the house creaked, he wondered who bore the sword of Muramasa up his stairs. It was
a monstrous effort not to pick up the phone and shriek for help.

Shaking, he poured a drink. You’re worn down, he told himself through clamor, you’ve suffered too many blows, Janice left you among scattering dead leaves and suddenly you understood what she was to you and now it may be too late. No wonder if you feel glum and alone. Get out! Go eat in some good restaurant, drink in some good bar. He rubbed his swathed forearm till it stung. That balanced him enough for the wry notion to follow: Yeh. Identify your police shadow and buy him a drink too.

He had forgotten about lunch, hunger was enervating him. Sane once more (though he could feel the terror coiled under a drumhead surface of control) he started for his bathroom, to wash and change clothes before departing.

The phone rang. He jumped, swore, and ran to it. “Hello?” he yelled.

“Ouch,” said the voice. “Careful, I need my eardrum.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Stefanik’s expectation that it might be Janice left an emptiness as it disappeared. “What do you want?”

“I’m calling from the police station,” said Keith Deacon. “Have some news that will interest you.”

“Yes?”

“Ionescu is off the hook.”

“What? How?” Stefanik checked himself. Did this matter greatly?

“I’m rather pleased with myself. I figured the boy must be innocent. Of the murder, that is. And the chances were that somebody had been with him when it was being committed. His sort is never alone if they can help it, and the police had definitely established through his landlady that he wasn’t in his room. So with Inspector Harries’ agreement, I engaged a man to circulate in the usual hangouts this afternoon, offering a cash reward and promising immunity to any witness. We
got two. Their account led us to a waitress who gave inde-
pendent confirmation. She doesn't read newspapers, wasn't
aware of the excitement, but she positively identified Ionescu
as belonging to a group which had spent all Thursday after-
oon drinking coffee and talking. Friday afternoon, late, he
hunted up all of them again and begged them to support his
prank with their silence.”

“So.” Stefanik rubbed a fist across his brow, trying to think.
“Why?”

“I've been down here bailing him out. He still has a charge
of obstructing the police to meet—though I expect he'll get a
light, suspended sentence. I also gave him a Dutch uncle lec-
ture. He stayed flip all the time, but dropped enough un-
conscious hints to make the answer plain. Indirectly, Mike,
this has been your fault.”

“How, for goodness’ sake?”

“You gave him to understand Janice might be suspected of
complicity. He's in love with her, in his own odd unenter-
prising fashion. He must have planned to stay arrested until
she had escaped—if she really was involved—and then pro-
duce the witnesses who would clear him.”

“Oh.” Stefanik thought back to the scene in the interrogation
room. “Yes. Of course.”

“I'm one of these Germanic types who likes to go down the
line, point by point,” said Deacon. “Now I'm coming to the
really useful news. You're clear too, Mike.”

“What!” Stefanik gaped into the phone, feeling as if struck.
“Yes. They turned up a fellow down at Half Moon Bay who
saw you on Pescadero Beach. He and his girl wanted a private
spot for a picnic, so they went on. But he got a look at you
from the head of the trail. He remembered both your MG and
the license plate, because they invented some joke about its
letters and numbers.”

Stefanik climbed from his daze. Nothing quite made sense
yet. “Oh,” he said stupidly. “Good. Thanks.”
Deacon's tone sharpened. "Now. It behooves you to help someone else. Janice."

Stefanik struggled for words, but none came.

"She didn't say much to me," continued Deacon. "I gather you had a fight after interviewing Ionescu. She thinks you accused her of being implicated in the murder; she isn't at all sure that you're innocent. She drove around aimlessly, getting more and more distraught—finally came to my place a couple of hours ago, half out of her head." Oh, God, thought Stefanik with something breaking across inside him, what have I done to her? "I gave her a stiff drink and put her to bed for a snooze. When the police called me about finding Ionescu's witnesses, I came on down there. Now I'm going back to rouse her and give her supper. And try to calm her down. I think I can. But you're the one she needs, Mike."

"After today?"

"More than ever. I'll take her around to her own house about, oh, eight o'clock. Be there."

"Hers? But I thought—"

"It's private." Deacon chuckled. "Not even a police watch outside." Soberly: "Your own apartment has some bad associations now."

Stefanik's scalp crawled. "Yes. But still—she was with the Lindens, and—"

"Not there," said Deacon gently. "Most especially not there. For the same reason that neither of you is suspected any longer."

"What? Him? Roy Linden?"

"It looks probable," said Deacon. "They're searching for him."

Stefanik thought, We're free.

"I'll be on my way, then," finished Deacon. "Be good to her, Mike."

His phone clicked off. Stefanik stood a while longer. In the shards of an old world, with the next still unborn, he could not
be certain what to feel. Oddly, after that initial spurt of release, his emotion was sadness. So Linden had done it. Skinny, bitter, wistful Roy Linden had unsheathed the Muramasa sword, and what now would become of his children?

Hard to believe, really.
Could it be believed?

The night pressed close against all lighted windows. Stefanik tasted horror. He must force himself to lay down the phone, take it up again, and dial police headquarters. The desk officer's voice seemed infinitely alien, asking his name.

"Never mind," he slurred. "I must know, it's urgent, has Gregory Ionescu been let go?"

"Why, yes. But who is this? I have to—"

"Is Keith Deacon there?"

"Who? Deacon. . . . Oh, yes. Him. He left a minute ago. Look here, sir, the rule—"

Stefanik put his phone back in its cradle. The irrational tension, nerves drawn so tight that they screamed, began to quiver out of him. He knuckled his forehead and stumbled across the floor. God, to have done with this! To stop smelling blood on every outstretched hand!

*But we are over the hump,* he realized in astonishment.

He gave himself another splash of whisky. The first one took hold, warming and easing. The slow wonderful knowledge became part of him, that he was going to see Janice again tonight. He tossed off his drink with a sudden whoop.

A shower and fresh clothes gave him back still more of his own mind. Why go out for dinner? There was nothing to be afraid of. A man had died here, but the dead were dead and peace be upon them in their loneliness. Peace, even, to poor mad Muramasa, long since refashioned into a blossoming cherry tree.

Stefanik chose a pile of records for his phonograph. First Bach, not one of the austere majesties but "Sheep May Safely
Graze” and “Jesu Joy of Man’s Desiring”; Beethoven’s Ninth, so the chorus might shout that triumph promised in the first two choices; and then, for climax and to hell with every music critic, some Mozart, “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik” and as much “Nozze di Figaro” as time allowed. While the first notes spoke, Stefanik went out to his kitchen and prepared an elaborate cold supper.

He ate with animal enjoyment, afterward lingered over a terminal drink but no cigar (since he was going to see Janice whom he loved) and let content pervade each cell until he almost understood that ideal Trig Yamamura spoke of. It didn’t last, of course. He began after a while to look more and more frequently at his watch. At a quarter to eight he couldn’t endure further sitting; he jumped up and put on his coat and clattered downstairs.

It was cold outside, and the wind still blew strongly, filling the wooded slope with rustlings and dry mumbles. He felt his way along unseen steps. A glance overhead, between flapping leaves, showed him a few stars. They were dim, unbelievably remote, and flickered as if some gale through their own spaces were about to blow them out and lay darkness upon their planets.

Pale street lighting on hard gray concrete, the open car and its buttoned-down canvas, stirred unpleasant memories in Stefanik. He couldn’t help holding one eye on the exit of the path, and was glad to get started. He snaked down the hill to Euclid, turned on Virginia, followed it across a tentacle of commercial district and on past Sacramento. That boulevard was thick with traffic; the headlamps made such an impression of smooth, controlled vitality that his unease a few moments back seemed ludicrous.

But on the other side of the through street, dimness returned. Most houses had lighted windows: not the Culquhoun place. Stefanik halted nearby and sat in the MG, waiting. He
wondered why other people's lamps always deepened the loneliness of a man by himself after sundown. The wind harried around him.

Time grew gigantic before Deacon's Cadillac purred to a stop in front of the house. Stefanik had not thought such a banana split on wheels could ever be a welcome sight; but the wind had begun muttering an evil song. Now his heart knocked loudly enough to drown the noise. He didn't want to make polite conversation, but stayed where he was. Deacon got out and came around to open the right door for Janice. She had taken off her scarf; the air rumpled her yellow locks. Deacon shook hands. She said something, Stefanik couldn't hear what but it seemed an expression of gratitude. Understandably! He glimpsed Deacon's homely face, thrusting out of shadow with a little smile. Stefanik heard the man: "Goodnight, my dear." Deacon climbed back into his car and it slid from the curb. Janice stared after it a minute, till the tail lights rounded a corner and were lost. Then, visibly squaring her shoulders, she walked toward her porch.

Stefanik scrambled from his own automobile. "Janice!" he called softly.

She halted on the steps. "Oh." A shaken answer. "Mike."

He reached her and stopped. A while his eyes dwelt upon her, poised lightly against the somber house, and he knew that (God willing) he had reached the end of still another road in his life. "Janice," he said, "forgive me."

Her lips curved, uncertain still but gentle toward him. "I'm the one to beg pardon, Mike."

"I never meant—"

She brought one hand down in a chopping gesture. "I know you didn't. I hope you know I didn't. Why talk any more about it?"

He had to ask: "Did Keith tell you about Ionescu? And Linden?"
“Yes.” She looked aside. “I can’t believe it about Roy either. I won’t.”

“It may not be true,” he agreed hastily.


The wind sent a scrap of paper rattling down the walk. Stefanik and Janice started. The thing blew by like a tiny parched ghost, and they both laughed, but it seemed well not to be outdoors with the night wind. Janice took a house key from her purse and unlocked the front door. Stefanik stood behind her, feeling acutely how her topcoat was blown back against him.

They entered the hallway. She led him on to the living room, snapping lights awake. By the withering roses Nerissa had sent, she halted. So did he. Their eyes met and stayed at rest for a long while. Neither spoke.

At last Janice laughed again, even more unsteadily. She turned, took off her coat and flung it over the couch, sat down next to it. Color tinged her face. She spoke in a dogged tone: “We have to decide what to do.”

“If we can help the Lindens—” He couldn’t honestly reproach himself for an egoistic reluctance. Damn the rest of the world! He perched on a chair arm and felt in his shirt pocket for cigarettes.

She sent his cosmos swinging: “No, not them. Not right now. I mean us.” Her hands clasped and unclasped in her lap, she looked down at them. “One way or another, this will all come to an end soon. And then what do we do? Pack up and go our separate ways?”

“No!”

She said defiantly, “I can manage very well. I won’t be any poor lorn widow. You know what a—a liberation this has been for me, in a completely selfish way. And, well, I’ll have money too. Don’t think I need help, Mike.”
“But I do,” he said.
She didn’t hear him. “What I’m getting at is, oh, a question of personal relationships. I have to start thinking about that. Should I move away, or what? I—before deciding anything—putting my emotional house in order—I’d like to know what your plans are, Mike.”

He rose to go to her.
The house was old but solid. It never creaked much. When he heard the clicking, Stefanik grew aware how quiet the house was.

“What is it?” Janice looked up, surprised.
“Shh!” He cocked his head.

Click! Click! The noise was muted. Only the mausoleum stillness around it gave strength.

“Something to the rear—” Stefanik’s pulse masked the small metal disturbance. He made a half step in the direction of the kitchen.
The door back there opened. He heard it squeak, and heard the wind hooting beyond. He remembered that door had an old-fashioned lock which any skeleton key could turn. He remembered that the sword of Muramasa was still abroad.

“What is it?” Janice sprang to her feet. He saw his own grisly attentiveness distort her mouth.

A gust of chill air swept around them and flapped the window drapes. “I thought the place was locked,” she faltered.


“Almighty God,” pleaded Stefanik.
She crept into the angle of Stefanik’s arm. “What is it?” she cried. “I can’t hear. What are you listening to?”

“Get out,” said Stefanik. “Run to the neighbors.”

“But—”
And then he thought that whatever stood on the porch might leap around the house and strike her down in the empty street. For if a dead man had carried his own head all the way from the morgue, or if the sword alone hovered on the wind and talked in a corpse's voice, there was indeed no flight.

"Janice, Janice, Janice."
"Somebody's calling," Stefanik told her.
"What? Who?"
"We'd better both get out of here."
She drew a ragged breath. "No. We'll go see."
"Wait—"
She started toward the rear, and he remembered how long she had lived with woe and violence, and not surrendered. He could have known she would never be driven from her own threshold. He snatched a poker at the fireplace. "Close behind me, then," he croaked.

She turned on the dining room light. It spilled partly into the kitchen, throwing big shadows over the corners. "What did you hear, Mike?" she asked again. She shivered. He could not bring himself to tell her, though the answer might have been enough to make her turn back. (But if that was what the whisperer desired?)

He stepped into the kitchen, holding his poker slantwise ahead of him, like a sword of his own. The back door swung on its hinges, framing a dim-seen porch and the wind. "No one," he said thinly. "Maybe it went back into the garden."
"It?" She halted. Her hand plucked at his sleeve. "What do you mean, Mike?"

The lights died.

As if across miles, Stefanik heard Janice scream. "The switch, the main switch on the back porch!" He heard a heavy bound- ing. He could just see the outline which filled the door and passed on through.

Farther than a star, the neighbors' window cast enough
illumination to shimmer along the sword. Its lean curve whipped up. Stefanik remembered how it had sought him in another place of scant light. He smote with the poker. Steel clashed, a glancing blow. The shadow made the floor tremble with its weight as it sprang aside. Stefanik circled to keep the sword before his eyes. He glimpsed Janice, beside him now. “Mikel” she called. “Oh, Mike!” Shapeless against a window, as if it lacked a head, the shadow darted toward her. Stefanik swung his poker just when the sword struck. Metal belled in the dark. The sword’s arc was bent aside, but it slithered on past Stefanik’s weapon.

Janice did not cry out again.

Stefanik roared and clubbed loose. The sword, rising, met the iron bar and flew free. He heard it skitter across the floor like a running rat. “Janice!” he bawled.

The wind answered him. He glimpsed the shadow in the door again, and reeled after it. Stars glittered above a garden which was one blackness. He thought he heard footsteps, but his own sobbing made him unsure.

He knew fists pounded on the front door. That didn’t seem to matter. He turned back to the kitchen. Now he could see well enough to find Janice sprawled near the stove. He went on hands and knees, groping and weeping, till he reached her.

The police flashlights pinioned him crouched there, raising her head with red-smeared hands. Blood had run over the floor to the Muramasa sword, as if it drank.
"Yes, I see. Thank you, sir. Goodnight."

Yamamura hung up. His office became very still. Through a tobacco haze, he saw the clock. Ten-thirty. About as late as he could decently phone anyone, even on Saturday night. Well, he had checked a sufficient number of timetable points; there was independent attestation to every significant moment of Deacon’s and Pereira’s past week.

He rolled his head, massaging the neck, flexing the muscles of arm and shoulder. Lord, it would be good to go home! But Linden was due here—when? Not for another half hour, at least. Yamamura got up, opened a window, did a few knee bends, returned to his swivel chair and sprawled with feet on desk. Relax. Give the nervous system a rest, as well as the thews. Unstop the senses, let street clangor and smells and chill flow through, make yourself a part of existence. That was what Nirvana meant, not oblivion as much as oneness. The ideal of the Zen sect was to stop speculating about the other side of mortality and try to become integral here, now, with this world where all things were beautiful and holy.

The phone rang.

"Satans også," said Yamamura in good broad Norwegian. He picked it up. "Yes?" And then, after a while: "What? Easy there, Mike. One thing at a time." He listened, guiding the
voice through what had to be told. "Like that, huh? . . . Wait, let's keep impersonal. . . . The fuse box is right out behind the back door, did you say? . . . Uh-huh. . . . And you're confused. . . . Yes, I know the shape looked that way to you, but remember what you were expecting. You wouldn't believe how preconceptions bug up sensory data, till you've interviewed a few eyewitnesses. . . . Uh-huh. . . . No, Mike, God damn it, I can't come down. You see, I know who really is behind all this and— Skip it. You'll have to ride this one out. Let 'em quiz you. Stick to the truth. I hope you can be out of there tomorrow. . . . Tell 'em I want to speak with Harries. Now. . . . Okay, Mike, lad, remember people have survived worse than this. Luck!"

The inspector's voice came angry in the receiver. "If he'd wanted to call anyone but you so soon, Trig, I don't know if I'd have let him. I'm still not certain I should have."

"You've got the sword?" asked Yamamura; and it was hard for him to speak steadily. "Have you checked it?"

"Well, it's been dusted, but that shagreen hilt doesn't take any prints worth a damn. Anyhow, the thing would be sure to carry Stefanik's traces—he owns it! The scabbard was lying on the back porch, by the way. Also negative so far, though we hope to find some clue as to where he hid it all this time."

"You won't," said Yamamura. "Mike didn't hide it."

"Look," said Harries patiently, "I'll admit there are a lot of holes in the case so far, but that's common enough. Once we know what to search for, we usually plug 'em pretty fast. Here's what happened. Keith Deacon was around to see us earlier this evening, in connection with releasing Ionescu. Heard about that? Deacon put up a reward, which produced witnesses who positively cleared the kid. Anyhow, he asked to use my phone, privately, which I felt he was entitled to. I guess his dabble in detection was habit-forming, because he
called Stefanik with a totally fake story: that we’d also written him off after finding a witness down on the coast, and weren’t tailing him or the girl any longer. Anyhow, that’s what Stefanik claims Deacon said. I hope Stefanik is lying. If not, I’ll sure tell Deacon what a self-important meathead he was. We never wanted to arrest the murderer at the risk of another life! Even an accessory’s.”

“You think Mrs. Culquhoun is?” asked Yamamura.

“Don’t know. It looks possible. Their shadows saw them quarrel about something this morning, and she ran away from him. He may have feared she’d spill the beans to us. When Deacon said they weren’t suspected any longer, and that we were hunting for this Linden character, it may have looked like a good chance. Deacon drove the girl around to her place, where Stefanik met her. They entered the house together. A while afterward, all the lights went out, and our men heard her scream. They burst in and found him with her and the sword. He could easily enough have left the weapon on the porch beforehand, dashed out and slapped down the main switch to support his story of being attacked in the dark. Linden would get the blame. The garden path neither proves nor disproves Stefanik’s yarn about someone running down it. It’s flagged.”

“Mph,” grunted Yamamura. “Any word yet on how she is?”

“No. She’s still in the hospital under surgery. A terrible cut, right across the abdomen. If Moffat weren’t a good first-aid man, she’d be dead this minute. As it is, quien sabe?”

“And yet,” said Yamamura, “the person who beheaded Culquhoun in one stroke needn’t have done less to a woman. Unless his blow really was deflected by a poker. A bungled killing doesn’t quite square with so much preparation in advance.”

“Oh, it could. I’ve known some of the wildest—”
Yamamura scowled. "Things are coming to a head faster than I'd expected. I'd planned to give you the murderer's name tomorrow morning. I never imagined he—"

"What the hell?" exploded Harries.

"He's taken the offensive, though," said Yamamura. "If we don't react at the same speed, I hate to think what may happen. I've never known a more competent killer. He's one of the few men who've ever frightened me."

"All right," snorted Harries. "Tell me, Mr. Bones, who is your choice?"

Yamamura stalled: "Can you come around here? Right away? Under these circumstances, I'd prefer someone official to be along."

"If you think I'll spring Stefanik on your bare word, you've got another think coming."

"Oh, absolutely not," said Yamamura, most softly. "Please do hold him. I tell you, we're dealing with a genius, whom the least thing awry may alarm. And then I won't even try to predict what he may do."

Harries hesitated. "Okay," he said at last. "For a while, anyhow. As soon as I can."

"You might bring the sword," said Yamamura. "I suppose there was very little blood on the edge; that's characteristic of such wounds from such a weapon. Feel free to wipe off what there is. Having the thing itself on hand may expedite finding where it was kept hidden all this time—which in turn will be evidence against our man."

Harries spoke an oath and hung up.

Yamamura struggled to regain the calm which had cupped him before. It was no use. When he shut his eyes, the image of the sword smoldered in darkness. He gave up, lit another pipe, and stared out the window. Shattuck Avenue was hectic below him, cars thronged, couples walked, lights flashed on signs. Such brilliance hazed the sky; no stars could be seen.
Yamamura imagined the sword hanging up there, above that fog of light, in a cold wind.

But when Harries' bulky civilian-clad form crowded the office doorway, the wooden shape was under his arm.

He laid it on the desk. "Okay," he said, "I've bent every regulation I didn't break outright, because you've often known what you were doing. Don't disappoint me."

"I hope not to." Yamamura picked up the sheath in his left hand. His right drew the sword. Its luster was dimmed by lack of care, but the lovely menacing outline had suffered no damage he could see. "Siva," he murmured.

"Who?"

"The Destroyer, who dances and is immortal." Yamamura shook himself, coughed a very small laugh, and slipped the blade back. "Excuse me. Sit down. I'll get right to work with you." He glanced at the clock. "Roy Linden ought to be here any minute."

"Huh?" An unconscious hand stole toward Harries' armpit, the hinted bulge of a gun. The inspector saw the other man grin, though with little mirth. He slapped his hand down on a knee. "Okay. Get it over with, wisebird. You might start by explaining why you've held out on me till now."

"I didn't see the answer before this afternoon," said Yamamura. "And then I had to mull it over, clarify points in my own head, check some vital data. . . . As a matter of fact, what happened tonight is pretty important evidence for clearing Stefanik." He glanced at the sword lying before him, and the muscles knotted in his jaws. "But what a price to pay!"

"Who do you think—"

"Let's take it in order, so you can follow my reasoning for yourself without prejudice." Yamamura's pipe had gone out. He rekindled it and began to speak in a quick planar voice. "I wasn't a bit surprised when Ionescu was sprung. He was never plausible. I quizzed Mike so thoroughly the other night
that I know everything significant he knows. And according to Mike, Ionescu didn't even seem aware of the sword theft till he'd been told of the murder. I guess, like a lot of Bay Area intellectuals, he spends so much time delivering opinions on the state of the world that he has none left for reading the papers. In fact, he was in that bar, the Howl, when Mike was attacked the second time; so he obviously did not steal this blade. But not knowing of the burglary in the first place, he couldn't have guessed Culquhoun was up to no good, sneaked after him, and so on: so his story falls to the ground.

"To be sure, he might have faked ignorance of the theft to Mike—but that would imply premeditation, some reason not to chew over so juicy a bit of gossip when they met Tuesday and Thursday evenings. But in that case, he must have been planning the murder already. Eh? Which he claims he wasn't! To clinch it, chronic poverty rules out his knowing Vivian Ward."

"Vivi—oh, you mean that call girl in Oakland? What the devil has she got to do with this?"

"You'll find out." Yamamura gestured with his pipestem. "It's clear, then, that the first intimation Ionescu had was from Mike, who gave him to believe Janice was suspected. He must have rushed out, horrified, boned up on the background of the case, and prepared his little diversion on the spur of the moment. I gather he's in love with her, and of course all beatniks are hopeless romantics. He risked very little, and as a bonus got a chance to thumb his nose at you."

"Clear enough," said Harries. "I wasn't on to that bit about his being uninformed of the theft, but otherwise you aren't telling me much that's new. Except for Vivian Ward. Now what—"

"I'm coming to that," said Yamamura. "I want to clear Mike next. Will you grant he's not unbalanced? That he wouldn't commit murder simply for fun?"
“I imagine so,” said Harries.

“Then we have to ask why he’d kill Culquhoun (and, by the way, offer an alibi far too sloppy for a man of his intelligence). To get Culquhoun’s wife? But that was unnecessary. If she were willing to marry Mike at all, her husband had given more than adequate grounds for divorce. In fact, I have a distinct impression she was near the end of the tether; another month or two of abuse would have finished it. So, was Mike after Culquhoun’s money, by killing him and marrying the widow? Again, it doesn’t make sense, either as a scheme of his own or a plot between him and Janice. This is a community property state. She could have gotten half of Culquhoun’s wealth merely by divorcing him—a good settlement, at least. Anyhow, Mike isn’t badly off himself.”

“Could she get much from Culquhoun if he proved adultery?” wondered Harries.

“Maybe not. But he couldn’t have proved it, because there never was any. Ionescu reported hearing Culquhoun shout something at Janice Monday night, about seeing her with another man through a window the night before. Culquhoun had suspected she was unfaithful, but if he’d been sure, he would have acted earlier than he did. So everything springs from what he did observe, or thought he observed, Sunday night. His staying away from home then. His loss of control the next evening, at a harmless remark of Ionescu’s—which, however, would have stung a cuckold! The attacks on Mike, the heavy drinking, all of that. Sunday night Culquhoun, already worried close to the edge by whispers that had finally reached his ears, was pushed off it.”

“So what did he see?”

“Well, it was not Janice in another man’s embrace. Because I checked with Rhea Deacon via long distance, and she and Janice definitely were in San Francisco together at that time. Also, as a minor piece of evidence, Ionescu remarked that
Culquhoun's shouted innuendo went right by her, didn't even register on her consciousness. To her it meant nothing! And I might add finally that Mike's personality is not that of a sneak. "In fact, people like Nerissa Linden, who knew Janice well, never took those yarns seriously at all."

"Okay, so there was no infidelity," said Harries. "What does that prove?"

"It demolishes the last reason Mike might have had for committing the murder," said Yamamura. "Oh, no, it doesn't! Impulse—"

"Yes. Personal reasons. Mike might have killed Culquhoun in revenge for his abominable treatment of Janice. Or to dispose of him without dragging Janice through the sordidness of a divorce court. Or in a rage, when he came home and found Culquhoun bugging his flat. Or even in fear of Culquhoun, who he was convinced was out to get him. I admit my only way to disprove any of these was by showing a more plausible murderer. Until tonight. Now, the swordsman has slipped a wee bit. Because if such emotional motives were applicable, Mike would not have attacked Janice!"

"Uh-h-h, yes," said Harries. He tugged his chin. "A point. Definitely a point, Trig."

"The ghastliness tonight also rules out Janice herself," said Yamamura. Pity wrenched within him. "But I never took her as a suspect anyhow. Partly, no logical motive. Partly, more decisively, a mechanical consideration. She could have lopped her husband's head off with this katana. It's that sharp. But I don't see how any woman could swing with enough force to loft the thing clear on across Mike's bedroom, where the blood tracks plainly showed it had fallen. A human head weighs several pounds, and the stroke would have had to possess a forward component of velocity as well as a downward shearing motion. It was an unskilled blow, wasting more strength than a woman could spare."

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“Unless she carried the head— No. The blood would have run out too fast, she’d have left footprints. Okay.” Harries smiled with tight lips. “On down the line. How about Oswaldo Pereira?”

“Well,” said Yamamura, “he did have some economic motive. But not very strong. He’s already a millionaire. He was indignant at Culquhoun’s lack of business ethics, but that’s no reason for murder either. However, what really eliminates him—”

Footsteps sounded. A hand rapped on the door.

Yamamura glided to his feet. “That must be Linden now.”

“Oh, yes.” Harries hunched his shoulders. “I’ve been wanting a long talk with Mr. Linden. In view of what you’ve said, I want it worse than ever.”

“Let me handle him.” Yamamura opened the door. Linden came in, his bony face glowering. “Hello. Make yourself comfortable. This is Inspector Harries of the Berkeley police.”

The engineer stiffened. “What the hell is goin’ on?” he pushed out.

“And this,” continued Yamamura imperturbably, “is Mr. Linden. Who’s also quite innocent.”

Harries, half risen, sat down again. His square visage became a mask. “I’m not accusing anyone,” he said. “Yet.”

“I’m afraid I played a rather dirty trick on you,” apologized Yamamura. “I expected you’d be at the San Francisco airport to see the ten-fifteen plane to New York off.” Linden seemed to shrink, as if under a slavemaster’s whip. “I gave the announcer’s desk word for you to call me here, that it concerned your wife. And I told you she was after me to explain your behavior and I didn’t know what to do about it. Not true. She still accepts your right to a secret.”

Linden’s fingers made strangling motions. But looking from side to side of Yamamura’s gorilla shoulders, he sagged. “You son of a bitch,” he breathed.

“I’ve no intention of upsetting your life,” said Yamamura
with great quietness. "But I had to get your help." He pointed
to his desk. "That sword killed Arthur Culquhoun. It may also
have killed Janice."

Linden’s brown skin turned clay color. He fell into a chair
and stared emptily through his glasses.

"I want your help in catching the murderer," said Yama-
mura.

After a time, Linden said: "Tell me what happened."
Harries gave it to him in a few sentences.
Linden nodded. "Okay." They noticed tears on his lids. "You
win. What can I do?"

"I think first we’d better clear your own record," said Yama-
mura. He caught Harries’ gaze and held it. "There shouldn’t
be any reason for this to go further than you."

The inspector shifted in his seat. "I’ll do what I can."

Yamamura perched on the edge of his desk. He blew to-
bacco clouds as he spoke to the slumped thin man, but his
tone was gentle:

"I never believed you were from Oklahoma. You do have a
drawl, but that can be heard plenty of places outside the
South, and there are lots of little things wrong with your
dialect. Once, when I asked, and you felt you’d better under-
line your claim, you called me ‘you-all.’ My friend, ‘you-all’ is
plural, not singular, and it’s pronounced more like ‘y’all’ any-
way. When you went amok last night—how little I blame you!
—the basic New York accent, what you’d spoken all through
childhood, got even stronger. I checked your birthplace,
but I already knew pretty much where it would be. I have
something of an anthropometric eye."

"Where, then?" asked Harries as Yamamura paused.

The detective sighed. "Harlem. No Cherokee ever gave you
those thin calves and long heels. When did you cross the color
line?"

"When I moved out to L.A.," mumbled Linden. "I’d already
lived in Wisconsin long enough to have lost touch with most o’ my old associates in the East. The firm that hired me—it was all done by mail—never asked my race. It came to me all of a sudden, why should I go on bein’ fenced off? I used to think the hardest thing was the whites who tried to be nice to me. They overcompensated. All I wanted was to be a human like the rest and make my own way.”

Yamamura nodded. “I know. I’m lucky, of course. Neither race in me was ever much reviled. Nor are the Indians. I wonder why the same people who scream about mongrelization feel proud of any Indian blood? Or stop to think how much China entered Europe with the Huns, how much Africa with the Moors?”

Linden’s Pharaonic head sank low. “I hadn’t intended to marry,” he said. “I didn’t think it’d be right. Understand? And then Nerissa came along, and I couldn’t help myself.”

“She told me she’d chased you,” said Yamamura. “Do you think she’d care where you got some of your chromosomes?”

“I sounded her out. She said she wouldn’t. But that’s all theory to her. How do I know? How does she know, even? By now, have I got any right to take the chance?”

“That’s something no one can answer for you.” Yamamura smoked for a while. The wind blustered outside. In the end: “You’ve kept in touch with your family, I suppose.”

“Yeah. My mother’s alive yet. I flew East sometimes to visit her. This time she came here. She thought maybe I could hire her as a maid, and she’d get to know her grandchildren that way. I sent her tickets, but it wouldn’t do. It wouldn’t work.” Linden shook his head. “Would it, gentlemen? I spent time with her, tryin’ to make her understand. Maybe I did. Anyhow, she went home tonight.”

Silence again. Harries cleared his throat. “This won’t go past me,” he said. “The legal validity of your marriage sounds doubtful—wasn’t there a California law against miscegenation
till recently? And in any case I'm not sure you're being fair to your wife. But as Trig says, you'll have to decide that for yourself."

Linden said a barely audible: "Thanks."

"You might be surprised how little it matters, if you tell her."

"Maybe. I can't think now. I'm too tired."

Yamamura opened a drawer and got out a bottle of Scotch. "A dash of this seems indicated," he said. "You can rest for a while. What I need is your help in entering the D & C lab, and searching."

"Whatever you want," said Linden dully. "I've got a key."

Yamamura turned to Harries. "Let's finish up Pereira," he suggested. The inspector nodded vigorously; it was one means of leaving Linden undisturbed.
"The murder itself distracted us from what went before," said Yamamura. "And yet that was an integral part of the entire thing. We know Culquhoun was like a wild man since Sunday; we know he tried to plant a microphone on Stefanik. This lends credence to the stories of what Ionescu heard him say and of death's near-misses with Mike. We have to ask ourselves, why? What drove Culquhoun? And that lets out Pereira. Here are his and Deacon's timetables, which I've checked out to my own satisfaction. He was in San Francisco all Sunday, so he could not have taken Janice's key to Mike's place. He never was over here much, never was very familiar with Culquhoun; so he couldn't have nourished the rumors that lashed Culquhoun into a killing rage, or guided the man as deftly as was the case. He was in the Eastbay Thursday, yes, with no clear alibi; but all Wednesday is accounted for. So how could he have known Culquhoun would be in Stefanik's bedroom at precisely such-and-such a time? He couldn't have!"

Harries nodded. "Good enough."

"There's only one explanation—not only for the murder, but its prologue and aftermath," said Yamamura. He gathered himself and spat out: "Keith Deacon!"

Harries sat up straight. Even Linden raised weary eyes. "Impossible!" exclaimed the inspector. "I told you, he's alibied as well as—"
"I'll come to that."

"And no motive! Everybody tells me his company will fold without Culquhoun!"

Yamamura shrugged. "He should care? He never wanted to be a businessman. He was raised like a millionaire, and that's what he's been striving to get back to. You know about this Tomek process? Never mind the details now. Let me say only it's something new, of fabulous potential value. Culquhoun was developing it, but had carried work to a point where any good engineer could finish the project. I suppose Deacon had you in mind for that assignment, Linden; you're simply a hired hand, the ownership would all be his—if Culquhoun, who was a stubborn nuisance of a partner anyway, could be gotten rid of."

"And Janice," said Linden. "She'd inherit."

"Uh-huh. Not a bad idea to wipe out Mike Stefanik too. That would take care of everyone who knew how much the process owed to old Josef Tomek. Then Josef's son Edouard, in Paris, who's a mere doctor, could be given a token payment for an 'interesting suggestion.' In a year or so, Deacon could bring out the prototype as his exclusive development. He could bounce Pereira from partnership as allowed by their contract; I dare say he put Culquhoun up to that idea originally. He could put D & C up for sale—which Culquhoun, who had an abnormal hunger for work, would hardly have agreed to do. And then Deacon could settle back to live on royalties."

"Okay, so you've got a motive," said Harries skeptically.

"Those ugly rumors about Janice had to start somewhere," said Yamamura. "Where else but with Deacon? Some months ago, he dropped his slight aloofness and began to get most friendly with people. He does have a gift for understanding his fellow creatures, punching the right buttons. One day in the office he told me a lot about my own past from a mere glimpse, and later made a calming-down Culquhoun try to punch me
by dropping precisely the wrong remark. Not that Deacon actually went around slandering Janice himself. Nothing so crude. A hint dropped to the friend of a friend could be counted on to snowball. Or he could plant the seed in some-
one's mind by a strenuous denial, if that someone hadn't heard the gossip before! You know how character assassination works. And Culquhoun trusted him, alone of all the world; Deacon had saved Culquhoun from an alcoholic's death, Deacon knew him inside out. It was easy to see that Culquhoun was fed the rumors in just the right, increasing doses. The idea was to drive him to such a fury he'd murder Janice and Mike, a crime for which he'd be executed or at least put away.

"By Sunday the stage was set. Having cultivated Mike too, about the sword club, Deacon knew there'd be a meeting at Pereira's; but Culquhoun had no particular reason to think Mike wouldn't be home. You understand, Culquhoun in his anguish had turned—must have turned—to Deacon, wonder-
ing what to do, accepting Deacon's guidance. Acting under that advice, he lifted Janice's key to Mike's place, with some idea of spying. But I imagine when they conferred on Sunday, Deacon took it away from him 'lest he do anything reckless.' Deacon's advice was, 'Let's give her an opportunity, and see if she does go to her lover.' He fixed that date with his wife for Janice; incidentally, his wife's visit East was strictly his own idea, not hers. He may well have told Culquhoun that he'd arranged for a complaisant Rhea to fake a headache or some-
thing once in San Francisco, call off the party, leave Janice at loose ends. Anyhow, Culquhoun was to stand on the path, be-
low Stefanik's window, after a certain hour, and watch.

"So Deacon let himself into the flat a bit earlier than that time, using the stolen key. Nerissa Linden will tell you of his recent interest in theatricals; he knew exactly where to buy a wig like Mike's brush cut, and a sports coat with heavy padded shoulders would complete the get-up. (Perhaps the same coat
he burned in his incinerator?) Vivian Ward was there too. Deacon’s acquainted with Oakland’s call girls. For a sum, she was prepared to cut her hair short, like Janice’s, and act out a love scene with him in front of that big window. I don’t know what he told her it was all about. A joke, maybe, or a con game. But it’s a fact that her hair has been shingled, and she’s pitifully frightened. She suspects—now!”

Harries looked unsure. “Hell of a disguise,” he said, almost defensively.

Yamamura shook his head. “A very good one,” he declared. “Simple. All they had to do was keep from facing directly out the window. A few minutes sufficed. Culquhoun was looking up at a sharp angle. Also, he expected to see Mike and Janice. His imagination filled in the gaps. Then too, both have characteristic gestures which could be imitated: the hand cupped behind an ear, the fist rubbing the forehead.

“Remember, Rhea Deacon, who could prove Janice’s honesty, had been sent off Monday morning. By the time she got back, Deacon figured that Culquhoun would already be an apprehended murderer.

“Lacking a key, Culquhoun couldn’t break in then and there. He must have seethed to a hotel and drunk himself witless. The next day, when he saw Deacon at the lab, Deacon probably told him to take it easy, make absolutely certain, et cetera—and gave him back the Stefanik key. After that, Deacon thought, nature could take its course.”

Yamamura had gone hoarse with talking. He flopped into a chair while Harries mused: “Yeh. I guess it could be. Especially if Culquhoun’s critical sense was all burned away by emotion. So Culquhoun mastered himself as much as possible, even went home to his wife next night. But Ionescu’s wisecrack, whatever it was, touched him off. He stormed out, ramped around, finally let himself into Stefanik’s flat and grabbed a sword with some
clumsy idea of making a murder look like suicide. That was thwarted, though."

"Also his next night's attempt," said Yamamura. "If you have an anthropomorphic God, thank him that Culquhoun stayed away from home again Tuesday. That may be the one reason Janice had a few more days of life." He hawked and went stubbornly on:

"Mike loused up the plan, first by refusing to be killed and then by going to me; and I in turn got Janice out of her husband's impulsive reach. I also went around to the lab, read him the riot act, and—when Deacon attempted to rouse his frenzy again—gave him a taste of judo. That would never do, of course. Culquhoun might simply decide to break the marriage. In fact, because of what followed, I feel pretty sure he must have come around to such a notion.

"Deacon, a born strategist, had already prepared for the possibility of the first scheme not working. Reverse English: kill Culquhoun, frame Stefanik and Janice for it. As a convicted accomplice, she'd be out of any share in the wealth, and there were no other claimants. Deacon had a means on tap to get Stefanik out of town Thursday. Providing Janice with a car, and knowing her personality, he could feel reasonably sure she'd also drop from sight. The account of her husband's murderousness would be a hard blow for anyone that loyal to take."

"Why should he care about her alibi?" interrupted Harries. "If she was only being framed as a coconspirator—""

"Deacon couldn't predict every detail," said Yamamura. "Stefanik might happen to get an unimpeachable alibi. It was best if both were potentially frameable as the actual killer. Deacon could see how things worked out and play it from there.

"He plotted with Culquhoun. They'd bug Stefanik's place
and thus get solid evidence of Janice’s misbehavior. Or even lack of evidence: under the new circumstances, Deacon may well have suggested to Culquhoun that Mike and Janice were the victims of some cruel hoax. In any event, those two men would go plant that microphone. They’d also return the sword, before it got Culquhoun in real trouble. As I say, I think Culquhoun was a shocked and sobered man by that time, though still unbalanced and unable to evaluate Deacon’s words critically.”

Harries thrust out his jaw. “And that’s where your theory stinks,” he growled. “Deacon’s alibied for all that afternoon.”

“Like hell he is!” snapped Yamamura. “He had a vigilant secretary who could be guaranteed to keep the world out of his office. He had Culquhoun, who’d believe anything, whom he probably told to help sneak him out just to avoid reinforcing the scandal. As you say, Culquhoun wasn’t really thinking; any explanation of Deacon’s would do, no matter how weak. I have found the store where Culquhoun bought a collapsible ladder that morning. He left it in his car in the rear parking lot. Having gone out, he fetched the ladder to that dark alley, raised it against Deacon’s bathroom window—and there you are. If any casual passerby looked in and noticed them at all, which is unlikely, he’d take them for a couple of workmen repairing something.”

Linden stirred. “But Deacon spoke—” He halted himself. “Oh. I see.”

“On an intercom,” agreed Yamamura. “I’m no electronics man, but I should think it’d be simple to rig a few relays and whatnot to trip the communicator switch at a certain time and play a message off the tape recorder he keeps with the rest of that junk.”

Harries smacked a fist down on the arm of his chair. “So Deacon and Culquhoun went off together to Mike’s,” said Yamamura, “and Deacon killed his partner. He took the
sword away, since its continued absence would look worse for Mike—and it might come in handy again. He went back up the ladder, pulled it in after him, and collapsed it. He dismantled his talking gadget, and took the ladder with him for disposal that night, when he'd worked so late he was alone in the building.

"Ionescu's confession must have been a jolt. Even though he never could have expected it would lead to a conviction, Deacon went out of his way to get the boy cleared. But it did give a chance to drag Mike down still deeper—which was welcome, since the case against Mike and Janice didn't seem awfully strong after all. She went to Deacon for help and comfort, after a quarrel with Mike. He got them together in her house, first inventing that story of no police shadows to make it look plausible that Mike would attack her. For that story, he himself risked little more than a severe lecture from you. He drove a few blocks, returned on foot with the sword.

"He knew the house intimately: knew a skeleton key would open the rear door; knew where the electric switch was; knew he could call so Mike would hear and Janice wouldn't; expected they'd come back to the kitchen together. The reason for that low-voiced call was precaution. If Janice survived his assault, she wouldn't have heard him. Confused—such experiences tend to be amnesiac—she'd never be sure Mike hadn't lied about it and turned on her in the dark. Of course, if Deacon saw his plan failing completely, he need only sneak off and cook up something else."

"His plan may not have failed," said Harries. He brooded a while, then looked up and said: "But where did he hide the sword? His house and car were searched for us by the Piedmont force. He must have kept it somewhere."

"His lab is full of little-used, bulky apparatus," said Yamamura. "Scores of hiding places. That's why I wanted you here tonight, Linden, to help me look. You can also glance over
Culquhoun's work on the Tomek process and see if it actually is at the stage I believe. And so on."

Linden jerked out of his chair. Fury was written across him. "By God, yes," he said. "Let's go!"

Harries also lumbered erect. "Let's," he agreed.
Behind blackly humped industrial buildings and lean chimneys, the freeway lifted; but at this distance its traffic was only a stream of goblin eyes. Wheels and machinery were silenced, the streets bore nothing but wind-flow. Lamps gleamed lonesome down the sidewalk, with darkness between. A small electric globe over the main entrance of D & C made the walls seem bigger and more smeared with night.

Linden thrust his key in the door. "No watchman here," he said. "Burglar and fire alarms connected to the next place. We share their watchman, but he makes his regular rounds there only."

"All the better for Deacon, then," said Yamamura. He shifted the sword under his arm. "Having hidden the weapon here Thursday, he dropped by again this evening to pick it up, on his way from the Berkeley police to Janice in Piedmont, and put it in his car trunk."

They spoke low, for some primitive reason, and the wind swirled and whittered about their words, distorting the sound.

Linden opened the door. They passed through, and he closed it again, as if to shut out something. On this side of the drawn Venetian blinds, a couple of dim lamps could also be seen. But the corners were full of murk, and the larger pieces of apparatus—furnaces, switchboards, pumps—seemed not so much scientific as inhuman.
Reflection off Linden’s glasses made his eyes blank circles.
“Where do we try first?” he asked.

“Why not his own office?” said Harries. “I want to call HQ.”
They went on upstairs. By the single overhead bulb, Yamamura saw a few projects going on, unwatched by anything but electrons: a slow test of plating qualities, a sample being devoured in an acid bath, a machine endlessly bending a piece of spring steel. Sometimes he wondered if such robots were not as mortally dangerous, in the long run, as the thing he carried.

He followed the others through dusk, into Deacon’s office. Linden snapped on its fluorescents. All three men blinked in the radiance; it was like stepping out of ancient incarnations. Harries took up the phone. Yamamura went into the bathroom and studied the window sill. “Fresh scratches in the paint,” he said to Linden. “Close study might show that a ladder of the sort sold by that hardware store was dragged over this spot.”

“But where’d he hide the sword?” asked the engineer. “If it could only talk, huh?”

“Don’t wish for that!” said Yamamura. His throat tightened. “You wouldn’t like what you heard.”

They returned as Harries put the phone back down. The inspector told them: “The man I got to look in on Deacon’s place just called back. Nobody home. Some neighbors were still awake. They noticed him come in around nine, but he went out again half an hour ago.”

“He’d want to be home if anyone checked after the attack,” said Yamamura. “But by now, he wouldn’t think it matters. What’s suspicious about a man dropping out for a nightcap in some bar, say?”

“Then where’s he really going?”

Yamamura shrugged and gave attention to the jumbled workbench. But it was Linden who presided over that, darting his hands from piece to piece of equipment. “Here, here, and
this here—fit them together, hook them to this timer, and you
got the gadget to play a taped message into the intercom. Easy
to disassemble again, too. Wait a minute.” He turned over a
heap of coils, an old radio chassis, some rheostats. “Let’s see
that sword.” With a grunt, he dragged forth a tight wire helix,
nearly four feet long. “Solenoid.” It shook in his grasp. “Here,
beside it, this laminated iron bar—that ought to be braced in
the middle for a core. But it isn’t!”

He held the coil out on extended arms. Yamamura slipped
the sheathed sword down the center. “It fits,” he said.

“Gimme that!” Harries grabbed the solenoid away. He peered
close. “That core bar looks rusty. Must have lain around a
long time, huh? So, rust particles in the dust inside. Maybe
on the sword too, when we check with a microscope.”

Yamamura studied the weapon, as if something were to be
read in the filigree of its guard. “Would that convict?” he
muttered.

“Not by itself. There’ll be other evidence, like tracing the
purchase of that ladder. Vivian Ward’s the key witness, of
course. She’ll talk when we put the facts to her.”

“I wonder if Deacon realizes as much,” said Yamamura.
Harries stared at him. “Jesus! You don’t think, right now—”

“Sh!” Yamamura held up a hand. “Something!” He crossed
the room and turned off the light. Their eyes gone unac-
customed, they stood blind and heard their own hearts.

The sword felt cold in Yamamura’s grasp. He understood
vaguely that the cause was his own unreasoned terror. He
forced that down and became a machine for listening.

The main door closed with a thud. Shoe soles clacked over a
hard floor. One man. Yamamura’s ears followed him up the
blackness of the stairwell. The light dry tread struck tile again,
and Yamamura thought of bones which walked.

The office door opened. A shadow blocked the luminance
beyond. Yamamura strangled on the belief that it had no head.
Then the fluorescent light went on. Keith Deacon stared mildly at them from between the upturned lapels of his topcoat.

"Good heavens! What's the matter?"

Harries shoved forward. "What are you here for?" he rapped.

"Why—" Deacon's plain, big-nosed face found stability. It even crinkled in a slight smile. "I might ask you the same, Inspector." He nodded at the others. "And you, Roy, and Mr. Yamamura."

"Answer me!" Harries reached out. Deacon slipped easily past the hand, across the room to the worktable. He leaned back on it, resting his palms against the clutter. Yamamura saw a wet gleam spring forth on the high bald brow, but Deacon spoke levelly:

"I may choose to resent this intrusion. What warrant have you?"

Harries moved closer. He reddened. "I asked you what you came here for at this hour!"

"And I reply," said the even voice, "it's none of your business. If you don't go, all of you, at once, I'll phone in an official complaint."

Harries stood still. He must have been thinking of possible traces on shoes, clothes, the solenoid, all easily ruined by a man who had plainly come here to clean up such traces and was now warned. He lowered his lion head and stated, "You're under arrest for suspicion of murder and assault with a deadly weapon."

Deacon didn't move. "I won't recognize that," he said.

"Come along!"

"I will not. This is illegal. Get out."

Yamamura made a step toward the tableau. Harries acted first. He reached under his jacket. The automatic shone blue-black in his fist. "March," he said.

Deacon sprang sideways. Yamamura had not imagined a desk man could move so fast. Deacon's right arm whipped
around, fingers clutching the iron solenoid core. It smashed over Harries' knuckles. The inspector roared and dropped his gun. Deacon fell upon it. Harries tackled him. An instant they struggled.

The sound of the gun was thunder.

Yamamura plunged to attack. Deacon writhed from beneath the lump of Harries. He lifted the gun. It blazed almost in Yamamura's face. The detective had veered even as the automatic came into sight. The bullet scorched by his cheek and smashed into the ceiling. Off balance, he fell.

Before he had picked himself up, Deacon scrambled free. Linden stalked around Yamamura. The engineer's face held an acrid resoluteness. Deacon backed away, toward the office door. "Stand off," he gasped.

Yamamura remained crouched on the floor, but called out, "Better obey him, Roy." For the gun muzzle was steady on Linden's breast.

Linden halted. His fingers twitched, but he raised his arms. "You won't get clear, man," he grated.

Deacon didn't bother to reply. He took the finicking aim of an amateur marksman and fired.

Linden lurched backward, hit the desk, and folded over. He seemed to collapse in sections, both hands pressed to his belly and eyes full of bewilderment.

As the automatic sought him, Yamamura sprang off the floor. The sword hissed free. Steel caught the light and flung it into Deacon's eyes.

The man must not have noticed what Yamamura bore, until now. He stumbled away with a choking noise. The gun barked, jerky in his hand. Yamamura heard the streetside window behind his back pierced.

He had practiced the kendo arts, swordcraft, even with real blades, but never had he felt a weapon like this. Not his own arm, but the sword itself lashed up and then across in a long
exquisite curve. He heard split air whine behind. In all his
days, he had not sensed so fully and sharply, nor moved with
such tiger speed. Yet, gruesomely, it was not himself any more.
Himself was turned to a thin frightened ghost, far away among
great winds, his flesh made into an engine for the sword.

Deacon eluded the blow. He danced from the office, into
the laboratory beyond. Yamamura bounded after him, snap-
ning off the fluorescents in passing.

Deacon scuttled behind a workbench. The sole wan lamp
out here washed his face colorless. The mouth stretched open
and the eyes glistened white. In that wisp of himself which
remained human, Yamamura knew Deacon was also caught in
living nightmare. But the gun swiveled about, braced across
the free wrist, until it gaped at him.

Yamamura soared to the bench top. Another upward leap,
an overhead stroke with the sword, and the light bulb in the
ceiling shattered.

He saw the gun speak fire, again and yet again. He slipped
to the floor and glided crouched toward the roar and the reek.
Night enclosed him. Barely enough light seeped up the stair-
well to tinge the sword and outline the benches.

Now he heard the breath pump in and out of Deacon. He
squat ted on the opposite side of the bench, under its top.
“Where are you?” sobbed Deacon. “Come out, please come
out!”

Yamamura went like a ferret around the barrier. Deacon
was a shadow melting into deeper shades. A shiver passed
along the Muramasa sword, on through Yamamura’s nerves.

He rose and made the final dash.

Deacon saw him when they had almost met. Springing back-
ward, Deacon took aim. Yamamura had a far-off idea that the
sword, mirroring light ahead of itself, was what showed him
the gun. The blade struck.
There was little sense of impact. The flash of the blow was hardly interrupted. Yamamura heard the automatic drop to the floor. Deacon whimpered, and Yamamura knew that half the man’s right hand must have been taken off.

His jaws were stiff, he could make no sound except a feline snarling. The ghost of him screamed: You don’t want to kill anyone! Hasn’t the sword killed enough? And the ghost of a ghost argued, this was all in his own head, sheer superstition had raised an atavistic impulse to do murder. Somehow, Yamamura stopped. He stood where he was and wrestled. The sword leaped back and forth in front of him.

Deacon had faded into the darkness. He couldn’t yet have sensed pain, not from an instrument so quick and sharp. The blood beating in Yamamura’s skull drowned out any footsteps.

And finally, like rising to the surface of a whirlpool, Yamamura achieved a call: “Give up, Deacon! Surrender while you’re still alive! I beg you!”

The office light went on again, spilling savage whiteness through the doorway where Deacon crouched.

He looked stupidly at the remnant of his hand. Yamamura walked stiff-legged toward him. Deacon emitted laughter. “Give up and breathe cyanide?” he shouted.

He ran to the nearest bench. Yamamura divined what was intended. The sword overwhelmed him. He had never sped so fast before.

Deacon was still quicker. With a hand and a half he picked up the metal-corroding acid bath. It was a glass box, about two feet cubical. Yamamura was a man-length from him, blade poised, running too swiftly to veer. Deacon raised the box over his head and hurled it straight at Yamamura’s face.

The sword swiveled in its hand. The flat of it struck the flying box. A splintered instant they strained against each other, then the sword whistled on and the box flew backward.
It broke across Deacon's eyes.

There was time for him to scream once. The sword stroked forth and the tormented head bounced down among shards.

Yamamura set his blade carefully on the bench. As he hurried back to the office, to give what help was possible, he wept.
Stefanik paused in his account.

"And how are they?" breathed Janice.

"Roy and the inspector? Both recovering. Nasty wounds, but not fatal." Stefanik looked out the window. Rain poured down over its panes, somehow giving this room more intimacy and cheer than was normal with hospitals. "For a while, though, it did seem that Roy was dying. So he told his wife—never mind what; a secret he'd been afraid to tell her before. Partly on principle and partly, I suppose, because then when she saw what it'd be to lose him, she didn't care at all. So those two, at least, gained from all this.

"By the way, Oswaldo Pereira says he'd like to reorganize D & C as a subsidiary of another company that interests him, and put Roy in charge of this branch, doing pure research. That depends on your consent. You have full control now."

The dear pale face grimaced. "I don't want it. Would he consider buying me out?"

"Pereira? Very much," said Stefanik. "And at a good price, he told me. You'll be a well-to-do young lady."

Her eyes closed for a moment. "I'd swap that a hundred times over for those things never to have happened."

"Yeh."

She looked at him again, and suddenly the grin he remem-
bered from the very first days of knowing her flashed forth. "Present company excepted! The doctor says I can start getting up soon. And I'll be as good as new, except for a scar that won't even show much. Would you like to rehire one battered assistant?"

His pulse stumbled. He said in wonder, "I never fired you, Janice."

They regarded each other, unspeaking, for a while that did not seem long. She said at last, more shakily than weakness would cause, "Now I can really be thankful the sword didn't take me."

This was no time to speak of such matters, but Stefanik could not hold back: "Trig said it had other work to do that night. He said he wonders if it knew."
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