

Chapter 1: The Frozen Scarecrow

Musutafu City, in the Shizuoka Prefecture. Late September.

It was a late afternoon when three boys were on their bikes, riding to the Haiboro Woods after school. One of them was confident in himself and his abilities, another was simply bored out of his mind, and the third was a bit nervous and biking so far away from their normal area.

“Slow down,” said Shikkui, the bald teenager in the group.

“Relax, man, we're almost there!” replied Yo, the so-called leader of the trio (he was the one that usually took the reins). They kept riding their bikes until they got to their destination.

“Is this the place?” asked Itejiro, the long-haired teen.

“Yup, we're here,” responded Yo. The three boys got off their bikes and went into the forests of the Haiboro Woods. It was a foggy day, so naturally, no one else was here.

“So, what are we looking for again?” asked Shikkui, sounding a little uneasy.

Yo responded by jokingly scratching his fluffy hair and saying, “At school, I heard this rumor that there was a house where all of the family died. I wanted to see if it was true.”

“Okay, here's a better question,” Itejiro spoke up. “I know you don't really talk to your folks, but does your girlfriend at least know what we're doing here? Does she know we're here?”

“Chill, dude, I told Tatami that I would be hanging out with you guys, which is technically true,” said Yo, as he rushed into the bushes. “Now come on!”

As they kept walking in the forest, they came up with their plan. “So, we'll split up, and the first person who finds something, calls the others. We'll cover more ground that way.”

Itejiro nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

“I don't know if that's a good idea,” said Shikkui.

“Fine, you can come with me, you chicken.” said Tobias.

And with that plan, they set off into the forest.

Yo walked for a few minutes in one direction, while Itejiro and Shikkui walked the other. The bald teen didn't want to be left alone, so he accompanied one of his friends into the woods.

The fog was thick, they could barely see twenty feet in front of them. After a few minutes, Shikkui was starting to get nervous. "Can we please go back? The fog is getting thicker."

"No," responded Yo. "Not until we find –"

The long-haired teen stopped dead in his tracks, as did Shikkui.

In front of them was... something; a scarecrow, wearing tattered rags, and a jack-o-lantern for a head, with a toothy grin. It stood there motionless, as if it was a statue of someone pointing.

Neither teenager said anything, they didn't know what to do.

That was, until Yo looked at Shikkui.

"I dare you to touch it."

Meanwhile, Itejiro was still walking. He was thinking to himself, *I'm probably wasting my time here. Why would there even be a house in these woods? It makes no sense –*

Suddenly, he stopped thinking, as he looked upon the very house he was looking for.

There was a tall fence in front of it, and it appeared to have been burned, despite it still standing. *This is amazing. I gotta tell the guys.* Quickly, he pulled out his phone and went to his contacts, but then heard something that made him freeze. A branch snapping behind him.

The black-haired teen turned around, and twenty feet into the woods, he saw a figure. A man, roughly of average height, and short messy hair, but from what else Itejiro could see... a blackened face, with yellow eyes, silently staring straight into the teen's.

Am I seeing things? he wondered. *How can I not see his face? Maybe it's just hidden from the fog, yeah, that's it. But the eyes... Why were they... glowing?*

Itejiro didn't know if he should get away or confront the man, but all of those thoughts suddenly went away when he heard something from across the forest:

"BRRREEEEEE!!!!!"

It was an ungodly sound. Itejiro's mind immediately tried to rationalize what it was, but it couldn't. It sounded like metal screaming, there was no other way he could visualize it.

Whatever made that sound wasn't something normal.

Itejriro immediately turned around to face the figure, to maybe gauge their reaction, but he was gone. The teenager didn't know where he went, and before he could do anything else, the very next second he heard screaming from across the forest. Human screaming.

“AAAIIEEEEE!!!”

Itejriro recognized it as Yo's voice. He ran towards the source of the sounds, trying to get to his friends, maybe save his friends from whatever was sending them into a panic.

He ran and ran, but it was too late. By the time he got there, he saw that Yo, the trio's fearless leader was curled up into a ball on the forest floor, crying.

He was the lucky one.

The next thing Itejriro noticed was Shikkui's body, lying on the forest floor. There was blood splattered everywhere, so much of it that Itejriro could barely make out his friend's body. His neck seemed to be crushed, as if the attacker pinned Shikkui's neck down while killing him.

Itejriro, grabbing his phone, ready to call the police, looking at Yo, who was reporting the words, “I dared him to touch it... I dared him to touch it...” under his breath.

Itejriro looked around to figure out what Yo was talking about, but there was no one there. Whatever attacked them was gone. All that ever indicated it was there were the footprints it left behind, and its two victims: One dead, and one alive. *Maybe he's in shock?*

But it didn't matter to Itejriro, at least not at the moment. The long-haired teenager dialed 1-1-9, and was frantically whispering for them to pick up in desperation.

Finally, he heard a female voice. “119, *what's your emergency?*”

“We need help, we're at the Haiboro Woods!” said Itejriro, frantically. “One of my friends has been mutilated or something, and the other one is in some sort of shock!”

“Okay, *emergency services are on our way, just stay with us on the line,*” said the voice. “*Make sure that your friend is not injured, and treat him for shock.*”

Itejriro turned around to check on Yo, and saw that nothing changed. He was still on the ground, crying, repeating the phrase, “I dared him to touch it... I dared him to touch it...”

Shino could hear the beeping of her alarm clock early in the morning, as she stumbled around in the darkness, trying to turn it off. Eventually, she managed to hit the “snooze” button.

While she got up, she began thinking about what life could throw at her today. Perhaps a murder. Or a suicide. Whatever it was, she knew that it would be her job to find out what happened, why it happened, and who caused it. But she had other things to do first.

“Get up, Kota...” she said, as she turned the lights on in her nephew’s room.

“Okay, okay,” the six-year-old responded, disgruntled.

After getting cleaned up, the two of them went downstairs for breakfast. Shino helped her adopted “son” with his cereal, as she made herself some coffee.

Shino Sosaki was the Captain of the Musutafu Police Department. Her job was obvious: Find out what happened at the crime scene, figure out who did it, and bring them to justice. Though her coworkers usually saw her as calm and collected, Shino knew that one of these days, she would see something that will make her rethink her entire life and career.

As she sipped her coffee, she seriously hoped it would not have to be today.

“Okay, Kota, are you done?” she asked.

“Yup,” said her nephew.

“Okay, go get your things, I’ll drive you to school.”

“Good-bye, Kota,” she said to Kota, as Shino dropped him off at school.

“Bye, Auntie,” he said back. After that, Shino drove to her work.

She saw all the people walking around in the city, and she knew she was in charge of keeping them safe. *That sort of pressure would strain anyone, eventually.*

Shino repressed that thought down as soon as it popped into her head, as she reached the police station, got out of her car, and went in, ready to greet her fellow officers.

Shouta greeted her first.

“Mornin’, Captain,” he said from his desk. Shouta Aizawa may not have been one of the oldest cops in the station, but he sure looked like it. Always having something quippy to say, and to Shino, he seemed like he was the guy who had the answer to everything.

The next people she saw were the station’s power couple.

Mitsuki Bakugou, Shino’s best friend, and Masaru Bakugou, Mitsuki’s husband. The two of them met on the force and we’re soon after married. Currently, they have a teenage son.

“Hey, guys,” Shino said to them, giving them a small wave.

“Hi, Shino.” said Mitsuki, followed by Masaru who said a simple “Hey.”

Yuu Takeyama and Ryuko Tatsuma were next. Both of them were new recruits, both of them were eager to help, both of them wanting to rise in the ranks, one more than the other. “I have all of today’s cases on your desk already,” said Ryuko as she walked with Shino.

“Thanks, Tatsuma,” she said.

And finally, Naomasa Tsukauchi greeted her. Naomasa was a District Attorney, and so, he was always there to discuss business. “Mornin’, Naomasa.”

Naomasa didn’t bother with a “good morning”.

“So, Imasuji is willing to confess to the murders if we give him a plea deal –”

“Hold on,” Shino interrupted. “Not until I get to my desk.”

She got to her office, finished her coffee, and was *now* ready to start her day.

“All right, what do we have?” asked Shino. Naomasa got back to business right away.

“So, as I was saying, Goto Imasuji is willing to confess to the murders if we reduce the sentence by sixty years,” the older man said, looking through his clipboard.

“That’s good,” said Shino. “Anything else?”

“We have some witnesses to an attempted murder. Some guy wanted to –”

SLAM!

Before Naomasa could finish, Commissioner Sorahiko Torino came in, mad as usual.

“SOSAKI! IN MY OFFICE! NOW!” he yelled.

“Coming,” she responded, looking at Naomasa. “Sorry, Naomasa, I gotta take this...”

“No, it’s fine,” he said, “You go ahead.”

She stood up from her desk and went into the Commissioner’s office, wondering what made him mad now. Walking in, she could see Sorahiko Torino, the big dog within their little town, sitting down at his desk, and clearly hating everyone and everything with a passion.

“You called?” she asked.

“You’re damn right I called!” he said, sounding oddly angrier than usual.

“What happened this time?” Shino asked.

“I’ll tell you,” the old man responded. “We got an emergency call yesterday. Some kid said he was in Haiboro, with his friends; they split up, and twenty minutes later, he found one of them dead, with his blood splattered everywhere, and his other friend on the forest floor, crying.”

“Could it have been a murder?” Shino asked.

“Maybe,” the Commissioner responded. “The kid who called didn’t see anybody, and the other one just came out of trauma this morning. He’s in his house, it’s a twenty minute drive from here. I want you and Bakugou to go to his house and ask him who, or what, killed his friend.”

“Understood,” said Shino.

Shino walked out of Commissioner Torino’s office, and out for the exit. Mitsuki followed, and started asking her usual questions. “So, what do we have?”

“Some poor kid was killed in the Haiboro Woods. We’re going to interview a witness.”

“His friend?” she asked.

Shino nodded, as the two of them walked out of the station. “Yup.”

“I’ll drive,” said Mitsuki.

They both got in, with Mitsuki driving, and left.

On the way there, Shino was looking out the window, thinking of what it could be this time. With being on the force for thirteen years, there was very little for the imagination. She had seen nearly all of the sick shit that humanity had to offer. *That poor child...*

“Any theories on who could have done this?” asked Mitsuki.

“Not any that we know so far,” responded Shino. “The only thing Commissioner Torino told me was that the kid was killed in a really brutal way.”

“What a waste of a life,” said Mitsuki. “That kid could have grown up to be something great. That isn’t fair. Like, imagine if it was Kota, or my little Katsuki! Could you imagine...?”

“Yeah,” said Shino, tuning out her friend’s continuing chatter. Mitsuki was still talking, but Shino’s mind had muted her, as she was thinking to herself: Over a decade of her life dedicated to the force, and she had seen some pretty fucked up things. Serial killers, human traffickers, and then there was what happened with her cousin... Her faith in humanity had begun to dwindle –

“Is this the place?” Mitsuki asked.

“Huh?” Shino asked, somewhat distracted. She hadn’t noticed that twenty minutes had passed. Looking down at her phone, she double-checked the address. Yep, they were already there.

“I said, is this the place?” asked Mitsuki again, as she parked up to the house.

“Yup,” responded Shino. “This is the place where the victim’s friend lives.”

“Well then, let’s go in and talk to him,” said Mitsuki.

Mitsuki parked the car, and the two of them walked towards the house. Shino looked up into the windows, and saw a boy, looking down at them. The kid immediately stepped back, out of Shino’s view. Shino wondered if that was the kid, and if so, what information would he have.

Shino and Mitsuki walked up to the door and knocked, and waited for a few seconds.

A young woman with blind hair in a weird hairstyle answered. “Yes?”

“Hello, I’m Captain Shino Sosaki of the NYPD, and this is my associate, Detective Mitsuki Bakugou. We’re here to talk to your Yo Shindo about what happened yesterday.”

“Of course, he’s my boyfriend,” she said. “Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“No, thank you,” said Shino, as they walked into the living room. “We’re here to talk to your boyfriend. Forgive me, you know where he was on the day of the murder, Ms...?”

“Tatami Nakagame,” the blonde teenager said. “Yo told me that he was going to hang out with his friends, but I didn’t think this would happen. He hasn’t been the same since....”

“May we speak with your boyfriend?” asked Shino.

“Sure,” she responded. “He’s up in his room. Let me know if you need anything.”

Walking up the stairs, the two cops walked in on Yo, who were in his bedroom, staring at the window, but turned around to look at the two officers. “Who are you?” he asked.

“I’m Sasaki, and this is Bakugou, we’re with the local police.”

Mitsuki nodded. “We would like to know who killed your friend.”

“Not a who,” the teenager corrected them. “What.”

Neither Mitsuki nor Shino spoke for a second, but then Mitsuki slowly approached him and said, “Okay, Shindo-kun. Can you please describe to us what killed your friend?”

“It looked like it was a scarecrow,” Yo said. “It had one of its hands pointing, and it was covered in rags, or something. I told Shikkui to touch it, I dared him to touch it. I told him that everyone would call him a pussy for the rest of his life if he didn’t. He approached it, and...”

As the brown-haired teen kept talking, his eyes began to rapidly dialogue, his breathing getting heavier. “...its hands grabbed him, and screamed, killing him in the process. All the blood... The sound it made... Scott’s screams... OH MY GOD, I TOLD HIM TO TOUCH IT!!!”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Shino said, trying to comfort him. “Please breathe.”

The teengaer’s breaths began to slow down, as he nodded.

“Could you tell us where you found this... thing?” Mitsuki asked.

“In the Haiboro Woods,” Yo responded.

“What were you and your friends looking for?” Shino asked.

“We were looking for a dead man’s house...” Tobias responded.

Shino looked at Mitsuki, wondering what Shindo meant by that.

“Did you take a picture of it, maybe you could give us a drawing...” asked Shino.

“Yeah, I drew this as soon as I got home after Itejiro called 119,” said Shindo, as he got off his bed and went to his desk. Shindo fished through his papers scattered there, until he found the right one, and gave it to Mitsuki. “This here is the most accurate one, memory-wise.”

“Shino, look at this,” the blonde whispered. Shino leaned in, and silently gasped.

It was a drawing of the... creature... and it looked like it had been around for a long time, if the look of decay was anything to go off of. It had a pumpkin head with carvings on it like a jack-o-lantern, and a twisted smile, long sticks for hands, yellow eyes, and its feet...

“Thank you,” Shino said, “We’ll find the culprit and bring him to justice.”

As they walked down the stairs, gave a polite bow to Nakagame, and left the house, the brown-haired officer thought to herself, *This is quite... disturbing.*

Shino kept looking at the drawing of the scarecrow, in all of its detail, seeing something new every time she got a different angle: It had spikes (possibly wooden) coming out of the bottom jaw. The rags it wore barely covered the creature’s wooden skeleton. In its head, the three holes that made up its eyes and mouth were uneven. Then she saw them.

Beyond the figure, she saw the creature’s feet. They weren’t shoes, rather, feet. But not human feet, rather those of an animal. They had four toes each, and each toe ended with a claw, which disturbed Shino... it was almost as if it was designed for sinking its feet into the ground.

Or into flesh.

“We’ll call everyone to my office to see what they think about it. Maybe they could have some ideas on what happened there,” the senior officer said.

“Good idea,” Mitsuki responded.

“Hey, Mitsuki...” asked Shino, looking at her friend. “What did he mean by the mention of “a dead man’s house”? Isn’t it illegal for someone to build a house on government property?”

“Yeah, it was a rumor from when I was a kid,” the blonde woman said, as opened the car doors. “The story said that someone built a house in the Haiboro Woods in secret, and died for some inexplicable reason. I’m surprised kids still go into the woods looking for it.”

As they drove off, Yo Shindo looked out the window, thinking of how he lost one of his friends to such a... thing... and that he would never forgive himself for daring Shikkui to touch it.

On his desk were the rest of his drawings, of the same monster, in different variations. One of them had its hands out, as if it were about to pounce. Another had blood all over its jagged teeth, a third one gave the creature orange lighting, and a wave, as if it was mocking them.

Tobias knew that even if they did find the killer, this would be something that would never leave him, haunt him for the rest of his life. And maybe it should... he deserved it.

In some deep part of his mind... Yo Shindo felt like he should have been the one to die.

“A scarecrow?” Commissioner Torino asked, dumbfounded, as if it was some sort of extremely late April Fool’s joke. “Really? Are you being serious with me right now?”

“That’s what it seems to be, judging by Shindo’s description.” Shino said. “It doesn’t seem to be any local animal we know of, and who could, or would, do such a thing like this?”

“Serial killers,” said the Commissioner, as if it was the most obvious answer on the planet. “That’s who. It could have been some maniac in a costume.”

“With all due respect sir, Shindo said that the creature's eyes lit up when Makabe got close, and that the sound it made was unnatural,” said Mitsuki. “How could all that crap be put in a suit that Shindo claimed to look like, quote, ‘ a skeleton covered in rags’. It just doesn't add up.”

“Maybe Tobias was seeing things. Trauma is known to do that,” Aizawa said.

“That could be true, but we would still have to examine Makabe’s body to figure out if it was a person after all. Since they grabbed Makabe’s neck to hold him, along with the fact they ripped him to shreds, there is bound to be at least some DNA,” said Shino.

Tornio groaned. “All right. Aizawa, you and Mitsuki go to the morgue and find if there was any human DNA on Makabe. I want to make sure before we go on some sort of monster hunt.”

“What about me, sir?” asked Shino.

“You are staying here,” said the Commissioner. “I need you to help gather up as many volunteers as we can. We’re going into the Haiboro Woods. After Shouta and Mitsuki finish at the morgue, we’ll go into the forest and find whoever, or whatever, did this.”

“Yes, sir,” said Shino.

With the meeting over, everyone got to work, with Mitsuki and Shouta going straight to the morgue, while Shino and the Commissioner left to gather volunteers.

This was gonna be a long work week.

At the morgue, Bakugou and Aizawa went to see Dr. Shuzenji, the station’s Chief Medical Examiner. Her skills helped the police multiple times, and this time would prove no different.

“Hey, Doc,” the older man greeted her. “How’s your life?”

“It’s fine, thank you for asking,” responded Dr. Shuzenji

“Well, Doc? Got anything?” asked the Bakugou matriarch.

“The wounds don’t resemble any conventional murder weapons we’ve encountered before,” the old lady said. “It looked more like a horrible workplace accident in, say, a factory.”

“Could be a unconventional kind of murder weapon,” said Aizawa.

“Actually, they couldn’t.” corrected Dr. Shuzenji. “The wounds where his eyes used to be seemed to be made up of multiple, small, blunt, wooden objects.”

“Like wooden fingers...” said Bakugou.

“Look at this,” she said, pointing to Makabe’s neck. Both officers went in for a close look.

“The wounds are made up of multiple marks. Whatever killed Shikkui Makabe grabbed him by the neck, and tore him apart before the other kid could show up, while killing him,” she explained. “No one would be able to design something like that out of wood.”

“Couldn’t someone use metal gloves?” asked Aizawa.

“No, the amount of wood needed to create those kinds of marks, and to hold him still at that kind of speed rate is impossible. Whatever did this, it wasn’t a normal person.”

“Great,” said Bakugou. “So now there is an actual possibility that some monster did this.”

“What she meant to say was, ‘Thanks, Doc,’” Aizawa corrected her.

Mitsuki nodded, pulling out her phone. “Shin, we got news on the victim’s wounds: They aren’t from any conventional weapon, and they couldn’t have been done by any average person. We’re talking about ‘ripping someone into shreds’ in under a minute.”

“Thanks, Mitsuki. I’ve gotten enough volunteers for this operation. I’ll go tell Commissioner Torino what you’ve found, and we’ll be able to start the search first thing tomorrow morning. Tsukauchi should be able to get us a warrant to search the Haiboro Woods for our killer.”

“Roger that,” responded Mitsuki, hanging up. “C’m on, Aizawa, let’s go.”

“All right, everyone, listen up, because I’m only going to be saying this once,” said Shino, in front of all the volunteers they assembled the next morning. “What we’re dealing with here could be something we don’t understand. While it is true that Yo Shindo said that Shikkui Makabe was killed by some sort of monster, we still can’t eliminate the possibility that it was a wild animal or a serial killer. I want everyone to be on their guard for anything. Got it?”

One voice came up. It was the voice of Officer Tetsu, a rookie. “A monster? Pfffft, ahahaha! There’s no way it could have been a monster, that’s gotta be a joke, right, Captain?”

Shino stared at him and then said, “If there is anyone here who can’t take it seriously, I suggest you leave now. Is that understood?”

There was a collective sound of agreement among the police officers.

“Good,” said Shino. With Tetsu straightened out, Shino got back to business.

“Now, thanks to Commissioner Sorahiko, we have a warrant to search the place. We’ll be splitting up into teams of two to cover more ground. We may have two days with this search warrant, but I would rather want this done by sunset. Let’s move out.”

And with that, all of the volunteers went into the Haiboro Woods, to find whatever killed that child, armed with nothing more than their pistols, flashlights, and walkie-talkies.

“Hey, Bakugou,” Takeyama called out to Masaru, as they left the main group and walked through the fog. “What do you think it is? It can’t be a monster, right?”

“Relax, monsters wouldn’t be the scariest thing it would be. In my experience, the scariest thing it could be is another human being. In my opinion, monsters would be like animals; Animals kill for survival, but humans can kill for plenty of reasons, including sick, sadistic pleasure.”

“Gee, thanks,” said Takeyama, sarcastically.

Shouta Aizawa was walking in the forest with one of the new officers, Ryuko Tatsuma, when they heard a branch snap. “It’s probably just an animal,” said Tatsuma.

“Yeah, could be the animal that killed Makabe. Don’t let your guard down.”

“Right, sorry, it’s just that I don’t like not knowing what we’re up against,” she said.

Suddenly, rustling came from the woods. Both Shouta and Ryuko took their weapons out, but before they could use them, a normal-looking man emerged from the forest.

“Oh, hi! Good morning, officers,” he said. “Is there a problem?”

“Jesus, man.” said Shouta, putting his weapon away. “I could have shot you. Why are you even out here? Don’t you know that this whole forest is under lockdown?”

“No, sir, I did not, sorry about that,” the man responded. “What happened?”

Shouta got a look at the figure. He had short messy brown hair, wore a dress shirt with a tie, normal face, and had golden eyes. Seemed harmless at first glance. A bit of a wimp. “Well, there are reports of a child murderer creeping around the area, so this place is on lock-down.” Shouta explained. “All civilians have to leave immediately. You got a name?”

The man responded. “My name is Kai.”

“Well then, Kai,” Shouta drawled. “I suggest you go home. If the guys putting up the tape stop and question you, tell them Officer Aizawa talked to you.”

“Uh, yeah, sure thing,” he said. “See you around, officers. And good luck to you.” And with that, he left, into the fog, and for Shouta, presumably out of the woods.

“What a weirdo,” Tastuma said.

For the rest of the day, the entire group looked around for whatever could have caused Shikkui Makabe's death, but to no avail. The first day of their search was fruitless.

"Great," said Shino.

"Don't worry," said Mitsuki, with a reassuring tone. "We still have tomorrow ahead of us."

Shino looked at her friend and smiled. "You're right," she replied.

While she tried to keep a happy face, she knew that this would be a problem with Commissioner Torino. After that, the police force packed up for today and went back to headquarters.

It was seven o'clock in the evening, and back at the police station, Shino was in a bad mood. Not only did they not find what they were looking for, but now she had to deal with both a disgruntled Commissioner Torino and Naomasa Tsukauchi.

"Great," said Tsukauchi, rubbing his forehead. "Not only did we not find some kind of monster, but now we also have to address the press on the matter as well!"

"Look," said Shino, trying to defuse the situation. "We still have tomorrow to search the other half of the woods. Maybe we'll find something that can help with the investigation."

"Like what?"

Before they could speak any further, Tatsuma came running into the office. "Guys," she said, her face one of nervousness. "You're gonna want to see this."

Tatsuma pointed Shino and the others to the main room with the TV in it, while Mitsuki grabbed the remote and turned up the volume. Looking at the TV, Shino and the others were shocked.

"Tonight on our Special Report, another man has been killed in the Haiboro Woods today by an unknown attacker. No witnesses saw the attacker, but the first person to see the body called the authorities immediately. It is currently unknown if the attack has any relation to the murder of local teenager Shikkui Makabe, who was murdered two days ago in this forest, as well..."

"You've gotta be kidding me..." Aizawa groaned.

"When did this happen?" asked Shino, still in mild shock.

“About an hour ago,” said Tatsuma. “We already have the body at the morgue.”

“All right,” said Shino, asserting herself. “Tatsuma and Takeyama, go to the records. I want to see if this new victim was anywhere near the area where Makabe was killed. Masaru, you’re coming with me to the morgue. I want to see if the wounds on the new victim are the same.”

“You got it,” said Masaru, as everyone left the area.

Two hours after Shino ordered everyone to get to work, the group of policemen all met back at the conference room, to share what they had learned with everyone else.

“Well?” asked the Commissioner. “What have you learned?”

Shino was the first to speak. “Well, Masaru and I went to the morgue, and found out that this new victim’s wounds were exactly the same; body ripped to shreds, neck held down while it happened, and lots of blood. Also, physically impossible for human hands to do it.”

Tatsuma was next. “Takeyama and I went to the archives and discovered that this new vic’s death was on the same side of the woods as Makabe’s; the area we didn’t search today.”

“Okay,” said the Commissioner, trying to remain calm. “So what we have learned is that this killer has a signature, and they hang around where we don’t. Great.”

Then Mitsuki spoke up. “Sir, with all due respect, we still have one more day before we have to call the search off. We can search the second half of the woods then.”

“I know, I know,” said Torino, sighing. “It’s just that if we don’t find the culprit tomorrow, we have to re-open the Haiboro Woods to the public.”

“Don’t worry,” said Shino. “We’ll find this scumbag if it’s the last thing we do.”

“Good to hear that,” the old man said. “Now, all of you, go home. Get some shut-eye. I want you all here at seven sharp. We’ve got a big day ahead of us.”

They all nodded, and cleared out of the room. As Shino left the station, she was still wondering whether what killed those people was either human or... something else.

Questions for tomorrow...