

B U N G O

STRAY DOGS

ANOTHER STORY



Yukito Aya tsuji vs. Natsu hiko Kyou goku

KAFKA ASAGIRI

Illustration by SANGO HARUKAWA

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WRITTEN BY

Kafka Asagiri

ILLUSTRATION BY

Sango Harukawa

YEN  
ON  
NEW YORK

## Copyright

Bungo Stray Dogs: Another Story Yukito Ayatsuji vs. Natsuhiko Kyougoku  
KAFKA ASAGIRI

Translation by Matt Rutsohn

Cover art by Sango Harukawa

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BUNGO STRAY DOGS GAIDEN AYATSUJI YUKITO VS KYOGOKU NATSUHIKO

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I am the one behind the recent chaos of this world. Throughout my life, I have dedicated myself to the powers of evil. I incited the turmoil during the Heiji era and cursed the imperial family to doom upon my death. Behold! For I will invoke a huge calamity across the world.....

—Emperor Sutoku's Vengeful Spirit  
“*Shiramine*” (White Peak) from *Ugetsu Monogatari*  
(Tales of Moonlight and Rain) by Akinari Ueda, 1776

## PROLOGUE

### The Waterfall Spirit Lord's Waterfall *Evening* Light Rain

Two shadowy figures stood atop the cliffside over the waterfall. One was a tall young man; the other was an older gentleman with wisps of winter-white hair.

The two men faced each other in silence with hostile, piercing gazes. They were archenemies, and they both understood that there could be only one left breathing. That was their fate, after all, and that fateful showdown just so happened to be that day. They already knew that this was where they had to settle things for good...hence their silence.

The waterfall was roaring. The faint glow of the setting sun was fading. A pale, misty drizzle enveloped the forest. It shrouded the slippery rocks beneath their feet, the waterfall basin far below, and even the two men themselves.

A secluded location at twilight—the witching hour.

It was both the boundary and beyond—it was the world between this life and the next.

The younger man was the first to break the silence.

“What comes next to greet you is death. Savor it, Kyougoku.”

His chilling, sonorous voice could send a shiver down even a snake’s spine.

He wore a flat cap with sunglasses over his corpse-like fair skin. The misty drizzle hovering around him fell to the ground as if it feared the bitterly frigid air emitting from his body.

The snow-haired older gentleman cackled.

“Magnificent. Truly magnificent, Ayatsuji.”

He was robed in ragged, traditional Japanese attire, like a hermit with a millennium of knowledge trapped behind his mud-brown eyes. The dimples in

his cheeks were childlike yet sinister.

However, there wasn't a hint of rage in the carefree, amused man's voice. He seemed like any jolly old fellow you could find on the street. But the young man called Ayatsuji angrily narrowed his eyes at the older man's snickering.

"Quit your laughing, you foul old man. That filthy guffawing is murder on my ears. Do you even recall the number crimes you've committed?"

"'Crimes'? Whatever do you mean? In fact, how dare you treat a timid, good-natured elderly man such as myself like a criminal. Have you no respect for your elders? I'll have you know that I am a law-abiding citizen. I even wait for the light to turn green before crossing the street."

The white-haired man's carefree tone never faltered.

"Hilarious," Ayatsuji drawled. "Let me remind your senile brain of the crimes you've committed, then. Thirty-eight counts of instigation to murder. Twenty-nine counts of extortion. Robbery, false imprisonment, assault. Counting attempted crimes would add hundreds more, from severe crimes to petty ones. Not once did you ever dirty your own hands, however. The Ox-Head Incident, the Suoudou Hall Incident—of all the crimes that shook society to its core, you are physically linked to none. The perpetrators who did your bidding never realized they were being controlled."

The older man didn't even attempt to deny the claims. His smile deepened, causing Ayatsuji to narrow his eyes with increasing disgust.

"The government couldn't touch you, since you never carried out any of these crimes yourself..."

Ayatsuji swiftly raised his palm, slicing through the cold air.

"...but that ends today."

He slid his hand into his pocket until he eventually pulled out a single copper coin.

"This is evidence that you were behind the atrocity at the museum earlier."

He held out the coin's front side toward Kyougoku.

"You took the coins that were on display, stuffed them into a bag, and used



that to beat the victim to death. You then had the nerve to return everything. It was a trick to hide the murder weapon. But this coin had both your fingerprints and the victim's blood on it."

The elderly man called Kyougoku pulled his lips back in a sneer, but his mud-brown eyes weren't smiling. His gaze quietly glowed with some sort of ingenious scheme.

"Remember this shine, Kyougoku." Ayatsuji flipped the coin high into the air; the sun's ever so slight twilight radiance reflected off it. "You'll apologize to the victims of your crimes—in the underworld."

"The underworld, you say? Interesting. But out of curiosity, Ayatsuji, I must ask you to be more specific. There are numerous depictions of the underworld, you see. The *Kojiki* describes *Yomi-no-kuni* and *Ne-no-kuni*, the realm of the dead and the land of roots, while Mahayana Buddhism has Naraka. Nichiren spoke of enlightenment and nirvana, and the Old Testament mentions a place of stillness and darkness known as Sheol. And then the Gospels of Matthew and Luke in the New Testament spoke of—"

"Hades," Ayatsuji interrupted. "Call it what you will, though. They're all one and the same."

"Perhaps to you, they are, yes, but I happen to care about such matters."

"You're about to find out which underworld it is, then."

Ayatsuji expelled a cold, corpse-like breath.

"Because you'll be taking a one-way trip there—*any moment now*."

The two stared at each other in silence for a short while after that. The thunderous roaring of the waterfall melted into the mist between them.

"Yes, but of course," Kyougoku emotionlessly replied. "Such is the fate of anyone who confronts you, Yukito Ayatsuji—a detective even more sinister than any murderer. What a fearsome ordeal."

Kyougoku seemed to be ridiculing him, but the cold-blooded young man simply narrowed his eyes.

"Kyougoku, this has gone on far too long for my liking."

It was Ayatsuji who eventually broke the silence.

“But today, I’m going to be honest with you for once. I’m actually not concerned about whatever schemes or evil doings you have planned. You can scheme and kill to your heart’s content, for all I care.”

“Ah, I see. ‘If you meet the Buddha, kill him,’ yes?”

“No two lives are equal. We mourn when a good person dies but rejoice when evil meets the same fate. But in my eyes, all human life is equally meaningless. I have neither the intention nor the right to speak of the nobility of life. But even then...”

Ayatsuji flipped the copper coin, allowing the clear sound of metal to echo throughout the mountains.

“But even then, you have killed far too many.”

The coin spun in the air as it descended the waterfall. This piece of evidence, which was supposed to expose the evils of this high-profile criminal, fell into the waterfall basin’s hazy depths until it could be seen no more.

After following the coin’s path with his eyes, Kyougoku squinted. “Are you sure you won’t be needing that hard-earned evidence?”

“Not anymore. You should know that already.”

Kyougoku’s smile reached his mud-brown eyes, but he did not say another word.

He and Ayatsuji stood in the deep valley between this world and the next on top of a cliff enshrouded in deadly silence.

Ayatsuji took a step forward.

“I can see it now.” His voice was almost a whisper. “A fatal fall—that will be the cause of your death. You will *accidentally* fall off this cliff.”

Kyougoku peered down at the waterfall basin as if he felt compelled.

“A fatal fall,” he muttered to himself. “Falling to my death, eh? Not a bad ending.”

“You won’t survive a fall from this height.” Ayatsuji took another step

forward. “It’s a straight shot from here. The military police have secured the area; they’ll have you surrounded any moment now. There is no escape. This is where you will meet your end.”

There was no hesitation in his voice. There were only the simple facts, which he stated dispassionately. Ayatsuji spoke to this criminal no differently than he did to every criminal he had exposed.

“I suppose there’s no doubting the prophecies of a famous detective.” As Kyougoku took a step back, his heel knocked small pebbles off the cliffside.

“With this, our long, long battle will finally draw to a close.”

“Indeed it will,” Kyougoku agreed. “Facing you was such a joy. But what a pity. The battle up until now was simply a precursor of this upcoming ceremony.”

“What are you talking about?”

However, Kyougoku didn’t answer. He took yet another step back, putting him as close to the edge as possible. One more step and it would be over.

“You cannot defeat me, my dear bloodthirsty detective, and you never will. This battle was doomed to fail, for a withdrawal through a mire has no victors. Enjoy your path to defeat, Ayatsuji.”

Ayatsuji didn’t move. He didn’t even lift a finger before this small, frail old man.

The presence... This presence that Kyougoku gave off—

“And allow me to show you that your final prophecy will fail to come true. An accidental death? When I die, it will be no accident. Behold.”

Kyougoku mirthfully smiled—

—and then threw himself off the cliff.

The waterfall roared.

Kyougoku’s tattered clothes fluttered as he vanished into the basin.

He cackled from beyond the mist toward distant nirvana.

“ ... ”

Ayatsuji silently watched Kyougoku's descent. He remained peering into the abyss, which had swallowed the phantom, until the military police eventually arrived. When they asked him what had happened, he didn't say a word.

All he did was gaze into the roaring waters where his nemesis had vanished.

The sorcerer: Natsuhiko Kyougoku.

The detective: Yukito Ayatsuji.

This is the story of the battle between two genius skill users who used their brains as weapons and their resourcefulness as fangs to put an end to this long-drawn-out feud.

## CHAPTER 1

### The Old Ravine Cathedral Noon Sunny

“The criminal is among us.”

A voice void of warmth echoed throughout the quiet cathedral.

There were several people inside, pale in the face and waiting with bated breath for the next words.

It was an old cathedral with cracked, plastered walls; an altar covered in a thin coat of dust after many years of neglect; and dulled wooden floors, which had collected countless scuffs and dents from shoes and furniture.

Each person’s face either appeared upset or anxious—a parting gift left by the bizarre, savage murder. They were all focused on one man who had an entirely blank expression.

“The criminal purposely chose one of the sixty-eight elementary school students and poisoned his breakfast. This murder was undeniably intentional,” revealed the only calm voice—a tall man who was standing in the center of the cathedral.

He wore a flat cap and sunglasses and was spinning an unlit Japanese smoking pipe in one leather-gloved hand. Violent words like *murderer* and *kill* slipped off his tongue with cold apathy, but behind the sunglasses, his eyes were stubbornly sharp.

The detective’s name was Ayatsuji.

His audience included the teachers and other essential staff still traumatized by the murder that had occurred during their school retreat. Ayatsuji was currently in the middle of solving the mystery.

“But, Detective...,” an anxious-looking teacher in a suit muttered, no longer

able to keep himself from taking a step forward. His bloodshot eyes and the bags underneath them made it look like he had hardly slept a wink. “It’s true the police cited poisoning as the cause of death...but it was a poisoned needle that killed the boy, not tainted food, wasn’t it? The boy apparently had a pinprick on the back of his neck...”

“That was done to throw us off,” Ayatsuji declared. “The suspect most likely pretended to come to the suffering victim’s aid and pricked him with a needle. Based on the child’s dilated pupils, paralysis, and difficulty breathing, there’s no doubt this was a nerve toxin. Even an expert would have trouble determining how it was transmitted—orally or through an open wound. The criminal exploited that to throw the police off the real cause of death.”

“B-but...surely, the police checked the victim’s food for poison! Plus, the meal was cooked in one big pot, and we all used the same plates stored on the same shelf. There was only one cafeteria, one kitchen, and one chef. Wouldn’t that make it nearly impossible to target a single student?”

“‘Impossible’?” Ayatsuji shot the teacher a piercing gaze. “Quite the opposite.”

A bespectacled woman standing next to the flustered teacher chimed in. “So...does that mean someone waited to poison the student until the tables were set and everyone was about to dig in?”

Ayatsuji shook his head. “No. With that many students present, someone would have seen something. Distracting the victim in a crowd like that wouldn’t have been possible, either.”

“Then how did they do it?”

“Heh... Yeah... I figured someone would eventually ask.” Ayatsuji sighed to himself before falling silent for a few moments.

Everyone anxiously waited under the detective’s eerie, heavy silence while they exchanged glances: *Did we say something wrong, perhaps?*

“Whatever. That’s fine. I was already painfully aware of how you all lack brains. It appears that, as the detective, I have a duty to explain every last detail. It’s like I’m teaching you how to change a diaper. Your simplemindedness



brings a smile to my face.”

Everyone was bewildered by the detective’s words. In fact, it would be the next morning before anyone realized that they should have been offended.

The detective put his pipe in his mouth and exhaled a slow puff of faint smoke.

“Are you familiar with Occam’s razor?” he asked.

“Razor...?”

The audience exchanged curious glances.

“It’s a basic problem-solving principle where the theory with the smallest possible set of elements is closest to the truth. In other words, the simplest solution is often the right one,” Ayatsuji explained while surveying each of their expressions. “Every child ate the same dish, and yet only one was killed. Then the logic is simple: The culprit poisoned the whole class but was aiming to murder just one student. That is the simplest explanation when you realize that not only does this kind of poison exist, but it can also be found almost everywhere in nature.”

“What...?!”

A stir rippled through the crowd, but Ayatsuji placed the pipe back between his lips and continued, unfazed.

“The criminal applied an extremely small amount of poison to every student’s plate the night before. The next morning, the criminal waited until everyone was eating and then made the victim get up from his seat.”

The staff recalled that morning’s events. Right before the incident, one teacher’s stolen wallet had been found in the victim’s bag, and the boy ended up being scolded for twenty minutes. However, the scolding happened in the corner of the cafeteria, where everyone could see them, so nobody ever thought that this had somehow led to the child’s demise.

“So someone poisoned him then...?”

“You clearly have terrible short-term memory. Did I not already explain to you a few minutes ago that all the plates had poison on them?” Ayatsuji replied

with a cold stare. “The poison was applied to the egg bowls. It’s the world’s deadliest poison; a single gram can kill a million people. This naturally occurring toxin is produced in soil or at the bottoms of lakes. Under the right conditions, it can multiply at an extremely alarming rate.”

“Ohhh!” a custodian who had been quiet suddenly shouted. “Botulinum toxin...!”

Ayatsuji nodded. “*Clostridium botulinum* is an anaerobic bacterium that produces a deadly toxin—one powerful enough to be used by terrorists as a biological weapon. It grows explosively in anything that comes into contact with raw eggs. The bacteria itself usually doesn’t produce any poison once consumed, but eating something contaminated with enough spores will prove fatal within eight to thirty-two hours.”

The detective quietly walked through the cathedral as he slowly revealed the truth. The old, run-down floors didn’t creak, let alone make a sound.

“The criminal waited until everyone had stirred their raw eggs to have the victim pulled aside, giving the bacteria time to produce enough toxins. Specifically, the criminal had the victim stand in the corner of the cafeteria for a lecture. Now, if a student steps away from their food, the staff is required to wrap it with plastic, but that only makes it easier for anaerobic bacteria to grow, and the criminal knew that. This was how they were able to poison only the one victim. Since all the students ate raw eggs, the victim never would’ve expected that his alone was poisoned.”

“Then that means the criminal is...!”

Everyone shifted their gaze to one male teacher—the PE teacher who’d brought the victim to the corner of the cafeteria and scolded him on the day of his death.

“I—I didn’t do it! I was just—”

“It wasn’t him,” Ayatsuji interrupted. “Think about it. The killer used a time-delay poison like botulinum because they needed the perfect alibi—one perfect enough to keep them away from the victim until he collapsed from the poison. Therefore, the criminal waited for the right moment to lie to the PE teacher and tell him that their stolen wallet was found in the victim’s bag.”

Ayatsuji pointed at one person in the crowd with his pipe. “And the stolen wallet belonged to you. You’re the murderer.”

Everyone immediately shifted their gazes toward the individual.

“M-me...?” uttered an almost inaudible voice.

It was the man who’d been questioning the detective only moments earlier about how the victim was killed. A typical young elementary school teacher in a black suit and glasses, the man seemed jovial and friendly. He had a perfectly ordinary, forgettable face.

“This can’t be...”

“Did he really...?”

The revelation created a stir.

“Th-this is ridiculous. Me? Kill a child?” The accused tensely smirked. “I could never do such a thing! I’m just a language teacher. I don’t know anything about bacteria! Besides, where is your proof that I killed anyone?!”

“You want proof?” Ayatsuji’s voice was deep yet soft, as if he’d been expecting such an argument. “Almost right after I arrived here, you quickly stuck the tiny, poisoned needle to the sole of your shoe and took a petri dish through the mountain path to bury it, hiding the evidence—just as I expected you to do. The markings the needle left in the soil will tell us exactly where along the trail you went, and if that leads us to that petri dish, then you won’t be able to talk your way out of this anymore.”

“Er... Uh...”

The teacher took a step back, overwhelmed by the others’ stares. Until a few seconds ago, the old cathedral was a mix of anxiety, confusion, and fear—but confusion never lasts long. The only emotion now was pure rage.

“Don’t waste your time trying to rack that puny brain of yours,” Ayatsuji advised in a subzero tone. “Numerous criminals have tried countless times to avoid my pursuit, but their efforts have never once borne fruit.”

The teacher took another step back in fear when...

“Detective Ayatsuji!” a woman at the entrance of the cathedral shouted.

“What are you doing?! What’s everyone doing in here?! How many times do I have to tell you to stop naming criminals without permission?!”

This slender woman was wearing a suit and had stern, almond-shaped eyes. She was a size smaller than the accused teacher.

“Oh? If it isn’t Tsujimura.” The detective turned his cold gaze in the woman’s direction. “You always have the worst timing, don’t you?”

The teacher took off, sprinting as quickly as he could.

“He’s trying to get away!” someone shouted.

“Tsujimura, that’s the killer!” Ayatsuji called. “Stop him!”

“Huh...? Huh?!”

The bloodthirsty teacher charged toward the entrance, but the woman named Tsujimura was standing in his way.

He lowered his stance even more and headed straight for her. But right before they collided, she spun and kicked his jaw so quickly that he didn’t even see her leg coming. The kick sent him rolling across the floor.

She swung her heel back down, slicing through the air before burying it in the man’s face, slamming his head onto the ground. Once he was facedown, she swiftly grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back.

“Stay still,” Tsujimura demanded while she pressed her knee into his back, holding him in place. “You have the right to remain silent and to an attorney.”

“You never grow tired of saying that, do you?” Ayatsuji griped.

“Well...he has his rights! It’d be a shame if I didn’t tell him them!” Tsujimura insisted.

“You watch too many movies.” The detective coldly peered down at her. “Besides, I doubt this man has the time to utilize such leisurely rights.”

“First and foremost!” Tsujimura glared at the detective while still holding the man to the floor. “Detective Ayatsuji, I’m going to have to report you to the higher-ups for breaking protocol. If you continue to ignore our warnings and collar suspects, then the Division will take action against you.”

“What are you rambling on about? You people are the ones who hired me to solve this case. So as your faithful dog, I gathered everyone here and did just that. Time was of the essence; there were still children’s names left on that man’s hit list. If the Division sees me as a dog, then they could at least praise me for doing tricks.”

“Damn it all! I should’ve gotten away with it!” the teacher yelled, pressed against the ground. “Those arrogant little shits, treating me like a fool day in and day out... I’ll teach them how the real world works. I refuse to be arrested until I make every last one of them regret what they did to me!”

“‘Arrested’?” The detective narrowed his eyes. “You don’t have to worry about that. You’re not under arrest. Criminals exposed by the Homicide Detective aren’t sent to prison, either. Do you not know why they call me the Homicide Detective?”

“Detective Ayatsuji!” Tsujimura shouted in rebuke.

“Tsujimura, let that man go.”

“But—!”

“Or else you’ll get caught up in this, too.”

The instant Tsujimura let her guard down, the man leaped up and shoved her into the nearby wall, knocking the wind out of her. He then sprinted for the entrance once more.

Ayatsuji didn’t say a word during the man’s escape. He simply gazed at the old stained glass window over the doorway.

Once a place of worship, the cathedral eventually came to be used as a school camp’s assembly hall. Countless cracks ran across the walls, and only a few strips of tape held the broken stained glass window together.

Another fissure appeared in the glass when Tsujimura hit the wall, and that produced even more cracks until the entire window began to shatter.

“It wasn’t supposed to be this way!” the man shouted as he ran. “This must be some kind of mistake! Nobody was supposed to find out... I would never be caught! *He* said so himself!”

Azure, jade, scarlet—various colors of beautiful stained glass depicting a knight and the Holy Mother had bathed in the rays of the sun for nearly a century. But these shards of the past came crumbling down in a split second.

Each colorful shard glittered as if it harbored light itself.

One heavy sheet of glass split the man in two from the shoulder to his waist.

Fresh blood squirted into the air.

The man's attempt to scream could only be described as a whistle coming from his throat.

Another broad sheet of glass sliced off the criminal's ear before burying itself into the nape of his neck, only stopping once it reached his chest. Vermilion blood spewed out of his gaping wound like a geyser, creating a pool in front of the cathedral as vivid as the shards of colored glass that rained upon it.

The man—or what remained of him—slowly fell forward onto the ground.

And then...silence.

"Is he...?" one of the spectators muttered. "Is he dead...?"

Everyone stood in mute disbelief. They couldn't scream. They couldn't even process what had happened.

The old stained glass had clearly been badly cracked, but the tape holding it together should have kept it in place for years to come. No one present ever even fathomed that they'd see it collapse.

And yet, it had coincidentally, now of all times, come crashing down.

The blood squirting out of the corpse soon lost momentum until there was no more bodily fluid left.

"The killer...died...in a freak accident...?" one of the witnesses muttered.

However, this was simply a misunderstanding. The detective, who was staring at the deceased without even batting an eye, was a cold, calculating man who had been sent here by the government to solve the case.

He was called the Homicide Detective, and everyone thought it was because he solved homicides—at least, until now.



“...Detective,” Tsujimura muttered as she sat up, grunting through her clenched jaw. “Detective Ayatsuji, once again, you—”

“That was a natural phenomenon.”

There wasn’t even a slight change in Ayatsuji’s tone.

“Just as death lies near life—and just as night comes after twilight—some phenomena are inevitable no matter what you intend or wish for. I had nothing to do with this,” he explained. “Those whose crimes I expose are one hundred percent guaranteed to die in an *accident*.”

His voice was as cold as a corpse. His black shadow didn’t even seem human.

Special A-Grade Dangerous Skill User: the Homicide Detective...

He hadn’t been given that name for solving homicide cases.

“You’re a detective who *murders* the culprits...” Tsujimura grunted, trying to suppress her anger as she stood back up.

## CHAPTER 2

### In Front of the Special Division Secret Base *Morning Sunny*

*My bangs look amazing.*

I pinched a lock of my hair and lifted it up while checking my reflection in the car window. My eyes met my own, so I narrowed my eyes sternly.

*Perfect*, I thought. No skill user would even dare try to face an agent as terrifying as me. I was perfect.

I was in the library's rear parking lot. It was eerily silent. Aside from the few elderly visitors coming and going, there were no signs of life.

That made sense, though. After all, this was a top secret government facility, an intelligence base under the Ministry of Home Affairs' control. And it was currently my one and only workplace. It seemed like a mountainside library on the surface, but a closer inspection would reveal its nuclear base-level security. The guards here were equipped with submachine guns hidden inside the pouches at their waists.

I, Tsujimura, was a government worker at this facility and an agent for the Special Division for Unusual Powers, a secret, unofficial organization within the Ministry of Home Affairs.

After unlocking my car, I slipped into the driver's seat. It was a silver Aston Martin I'd gone through the trouble of having imported from England—the perfect car for an agent. Its lightweight magnesium body and twelve-cylinder engine evoked a living machine built to run. This vehicle had the speed and toughness that every secret agent needed...or at least, that was the idea, but I still hadn't been lucky enough to end up in any car chases.

I turned the key and started driving. The path into town was quiet, so I began contemplating the situation I was in.

My job was to *monitor one particular detective*. He lived up to his title, since he would solve any case or issue presented to him. Most of his jobs involved saving people who were in trouble, so on the scale of “good guy” versus “bad guy,” he skewed toward the former.

The government, however, saw things differently. To them, he was like a nuclear warhead left on the sidewalk. They always had to know exactly what he was doing, what he was thinking, and where he was. If he went out of control on them, he was liable to raze an entire city, and more than a few men at the top would lose their jobs if that happened on their watch.

This detective was a Special A-Grade Dangerous Skill User and a regular on the government’s watch list. The Homicide Detective—that was the nickname given to this man who I’d been assigned to monitor and manage in my capacity as a Special Division agent.

Failure wasn’t an option.

I could still clearly remember how cold the veteran agent’s eyes were when they were relaying the orders to me.

After stopping by a café and grabbing a sugar-free latte, I placed my drink in the car cup holder and drove toward my destination once more, taking an occasional sip of coffee. Every time I stopped at a red light, I would check the rearview mirror: *Looks like nobody’s tailing me, yet again.*

You could never be too cautious when you worked for the government, especially when you were a rookie agent such as myself. That said, I’d never actually had anyone follow me.

At any rate, I was a government agent, which still sounded outrageous to me, even though I’d been on assignment for two years now. Sometimes, I felt like I was in a movie or mystery novel. Only a few years ago, I was just an ignorant college student, but now I was part of something so secret that I had to tell even my closest friends that I worked for an import company.

Of course, I was confident in my abilities. I passed my marksmanship and martial arts training with flying colors, and I had more drive than anyone. That was why I’d been given such an important mission. The higher-ups would never assign this work to someone who wasn’t capable of a job well-done...is what I’d

like to think.

I suddenly noticed my destination up ahead: the Ayatsuji Detective Agency. Facing the main road was an old brick building with a narrow entrance on the first floor. At first glance, it looked like just some shabby building on the corner of some shabby street, but the government had actually bought the rest of the building and every adjacent one for security reasons.

After driving past the front of the building, I parked at a paid lot up ahead, then pretended to do my makeup in the side mirror while checking for any suspicious individuals. Next, I took the headset out of my pocket, put it over my ears, and hit the call button.

“Calling backup. Code 4048.”

My voice and request were instantly recognized by the device, which promptly put me on the line with the other party.

**“This is Sniper Support Team One,”** a man boorishly answered.

“This is Agent Code 4048, Inspector Tsujimura. Ready to track target and monitor the interior.”

**“Roger that. Shifting to position D-2 and monitoring. Target is inside the building.”**

“Good work,” I replied, but it was met with a subtle chuckle.

**“You’re late, Tsujimura. Did your superior lecture you again?”**

“N-no, sir!”

**“The look on your face tells me all I need to know.”**

I shifted my gaze toward the top of the building across the street, where I briefly noticed a lens on the edge of the rooftop as the sunlight reflected off it. They were the Division’s sniper team who monitored the detective agency twenty-four hours a day. Furthermore, they had orders to shoot Detective Ayatsuji on sight if he ever betrayed the government or used his skill on a civilian without permission.

**“As I’m sure you know,”** the sniper began over the radio, **“that building is a tiger’s cage. Our job’s to shoot the tiger dead if it acts up, but we want to**

**avoid that, yeah?”**

“...Don’t worry. I’m an agent, after all.”

**“I know. Good luck in there. Sniper Team out.”**

After the radio cut out, I took a deep breath, held it in, then exhaled.

*Bring it on.*

I’d developed a habit of saying that twice every night before going to bed. As long as I was around, I wasn’t going to let any sinister skill user get away with evil.

I walked up to the agency and eventually stopped in front of the entrance. After spinning my key around my finger and stuffing it into my pocket, I leaned forward and said:

“Your biggest mistake was being born in the same era as me.”

It was a line from this one incredible spy movie I loved about a female spy who wore a biker jacket and sunglasses. I couldn’t wait to be like her one day.

I then opened the front door.

\*

The inside was dim and smelled faintly of pipe smoke. The arched ceiling hung over the rows of amber wicker chairs. Floor to ceiling bookshelves lined the walls, and a ceiling fan was slowly stirring the lukewarm air. The Western antique lamp illuminated the room with a copper light, giving the place a kind of listless, lazy afternoon ambience, even in the morning.

Sprawled out on the floor by their master’s feet were two cats: one black and one calico, but both yawning as if they were bored. The black cat looked up at me and meowed disinterestedly at me.

The place looked more like some sort of Western lounge than a detective agency.

The detective was rocking in his armchair with a book in hand and slowly exhaling the smoke from his pipe.

“...Hey, Tsujimura. Good morning.”

He glanced in my direction before immediately going back to his book. This pale-skinned man was wearing a light-violet flat cap over his emotionless eyes, which could send a chill down the spine of anyone who looked in them.

He was a Special A-Grade Dangerous Skill User.

Perhaps it was his title... Then again, maybe it was something else entirely... Regardless, there was something powerful about this detective that drew me toward him when he was like this—much to my dismay. I guess you could call it an aura.

“Detective Ayatsuji.” I spoke with an even stiffer voice than usual so that he wouldn’t pick up on my timidity. “‘Good morning’? Really? Don’t you have something more important to tell me first?”

“...Oh?” Detective Ayatsuji grunted as he turned the page. “Do I?”

He didn’t even take his eyes off the book. This wasn’t going to work.

In my head, the ideal version of myself (dressed in a biker jacket and sunglasses) whispered, *What is your mission? You’re an agent. And who is that man? He’s your target, who you’re supposed to be monitoring. In other words, he should be looking to you for guidance. Are you really fine with him disrespecting you like this?*

*No way!* I firmly replied, then confidently strolled over to the detective’s side and swiped the book right out of his hand.

“You could at least put your book down when someone’s talking to you,” I said as icily as I could. “I was given orders to keep an eye on you, Detective Ayatsuji, and depending on your attitude, I have the right to shoot you. Got it?”

He idly looked up at the book I’d snatched from him and replied, “Yes, message received. You really know how to threaten people.”

The detective flipped his pipe around and tapped it a few times to empty the ashes.

“How about this, then?” he said. “From now on, I’ll treat you with respect, and in return, you’ll make me a cup of coffee.”

“Oh. That’s it?” His anticlimactic request caught me off guard. “Sure, I can do



that.”

“Two brown sugars, no milk.”

“All right.”

I went into the kitchen, boiled some water, and placed coffee grounds into the dripper. Then I slowly poured the water over the coffee grounds and waited for it to stop bubbling before pouring the rest. I timed it perfectly, swiftly removing the dripper before the coffee could turn bitter or overdiluted. Only when I began to check the richness and aroma did it hit me.

“I am not your maid!” I screamed.

“Took you long enough to realize,” Detective Ayatsuji coldly replied with his eyes still glued on the book. “It just occurred to me—what is this ‘more important’ thing I should be telling you?”

“Yesterday’s incident!” I shouted with a cup of coffee in hand. “The student murdered during a school retreat. You ignored the Division’s warning and solved the case! We can’t have you doing that!”

“Why?” he asked calmly.

Yesterday’s case: an elementary school student killed among his classmates at a three-night, four-day outdoor retreat. The urgency of the crime made the Division call in Detective Ayatsuji. Apparently, one of the students was related to some government official, so special measures were taken. (Obviously, that information never reached any of us on the case, since the higher-ups in any job would never relay such personal information to their low-level employees.)

Therefore, Detective Ayatsuji was closely monitored, since he was obviously going to be on-site investigating. After all, he was far more dangerous than any child murderer. Nevertheless, the second we took our eyes off him...

“Listen here, Detective Ayatsuji. The Division is being quite generous by sending me to your office and having me monitor you. You do realize that, under normal circumstances, you’d be dealing with gun-toting guards and iron-barred windows, yes? So you can’t complain about how you’re being treated. If anything, you ought to appreciate—”

“I do appreciate it. Especially the fact that they sent someone as easy to handle as you.”

“Excuse me?!”

I almost instinctively raised my fist, but I still had a cup of coffee in my right hand.

“How about you put that cup of coffee right there? Wouldn’t want it to go to waste.”

“Huh...? Oh, okay.”

He had a point, so I reluctantly placed the cup on his coffee table. He then closed his book, calmly lifted the cup, and leisurely took a sip.

“Oh, wow. Not bad.”

“Th-thanks.”

*He praised me. That really came out of nowhere...*

Then it hit me.

“You’re not fooling anyone with your smooth-talking!” I yelled. “Argh... What do you even mean, I’m ‘easy to handle’?! I’ll have you know that I’m a secret agent! I’m known among my peers as a woman of mystery! Nothing about an elite go-getter like me is easy to handle—”

“Your boss chewed you out before you got here, didn’t he?”

“Uh?!”

“So you stopped by the café for a latte as a little pick-me-up. After that, you took the narrow backroad past the used bookstore in District One to get here.”

“Huh?! Wha—?! ”

“Before you came in, you radioed your snipers, and they told you they were moving to D-2 for further surveillance,” he continued. “That was when you recited that movie line—the trademark quip. ‘Your biggest mistake was being born in the same era as me,’ I believe it was?”

“Wh-what the—?! How did you know all that?! I... How?!”

“Relax.”

No way in hell I could relax after hearing that.

Secrecy was the greatest armor we had in this business. The most predictable agents only met danger and destruction and ambushes. I was here to monitor the detective, and any slips on my end would affect the odds of my mission going well.

He was right, though. When I was at the library, which was one of our secret bases, my mentor in the Division, Sakaguchi, reprimanded me because of what happened during the mission the previous day. I also bought a latte on my way here and used that route in the antique-book district. He was right about it all. The confidence I’d had before stepping inside this agency just exploded like fireworks, slowly fizzling out into nothingness.

“Calm down, woman of mystery. You didn’t do anything wrong. We both simply did our jobs. That’s all. You’re completely right, too. Under normal circumstances, I would be behind bars. I’ve certainly killed enough people to deserve that, and I have the potential to kill more going forward as well. So why am I sitting in my office drinking coffee, you ask? Because the government considers me a useful pawn—my powers of observation are very keen for a detective. As I just proved to you.”

“Observation...”

Detective Ayatsuji sighed, exhausted, then placed his pipe down before continuing:

“You were fifteen minutes later than usual, so I figured your boss had chewed you out. You’re never late without a reason, and I’ve heard your boss is quite a stickler. I also heard there’s a nearby café you frequent, and from your lipstick smudge, I guessed you ordered a latte. And that used bookstore is on a one-way street that doesn’t get much traffic, which lets you save time while still looking out for pursuers. Oh, and you always contact the sniper unit in front of my building whenever you visit. As for their position change: that much I can predict since they’re watching me twenty-four seven.”

*Powers of observation...*

*So this is what it means to be a true detective...*

“W-wait, wait, wait!” I protested while pointing at the entrance of the agency. “That movie line I said when I got here! ‘Your biggest mistake was being born in the same era as me!’ How...how did you guess that?!”

“Oh, that?” He didn’t even bat an eye. “You should keep your voice down if you don’t want people hearing you.”

I covered my face and hunched over.

That was hands down the most embarrassing moment of my life.

\*

Before I forget, I should probably explain what skill users are.

While not exactly common, some people possess special powers, and certain powers are a threat to society. Therefore, the government created a secret organization called the Special Division for Unusual Powers to monitor them.

Skill-user crimes were showing no signs of decline, and organized crime involving skill users was a constant source of anxiety for the Division. Of course, not all skill users were bad people. Some of these organized groups had even received permission from the Division to legally use their skills in a professional way. There were even rumors of a small cadre of elite users who ran a detective agency and solved crimes by using their skills. They were based in Yokohama, from what I could remember.

At any rate, the Division oversaw and managed extremely dangerous skill users, and it even culled them if absolutely necessary. And at the top of that list of skill users was none other than the Homicide Detective, Yukito Ayatsuji.

The power to make his target die in an accident.

As long as certain conditions were fulfilled, he could flout all reason and lead people to their deaths.

There were many cases of powerful, dangerous skills as well. Some could blow up, shred, or even squish their enemies. Each one of these extraordinary powers were obviously dangerous and required caution—but that wasn’t enough to earn someone the title of Special A-Grade Dangerous Skill User. Detective Ayatsuji’s skill ignored all physical barriers. It twisted probability in its

favor and granted an “accidental” death to the target. It didn’t matter whether the target was on the other side of the world or had the most powerful skill capable of killing God himself. In a way, perhaps you could have even called it a “curse.”

There was no way to predict the cause of death. Suffocation, stroke, falling to one’s death, suicide, illness, heart attack—the list went on. Nor was there any way to prevent or cancel the “curse,” either. Furthermore, only one condition needed to be met to activate this skill: The target had to actually *be found guilty of the crime committed*.

You could even say it was a very detectivesque power. Detectives uncovered the truth, solved the case, and revealed the culprit. Only then did Ayatsuji’s deadly skill take effect.

And that was exactly why any proposal to kill this dangerous skill user had been turned down every time it was submitted to the higher-ups.

Nevertheless, a lethal skill with a 100 percent kill rate that couldn’t be defended against made him a rarity of rarities even among the other dangerous skill users on the Division’s watch list. On top of that, Detective Ayatsuji didn’t have the most agreeable personality, so the Division wasn’t confident whether it had him fully under their control. That was also why we received proposals to assassinate Detective Ayatsuji two to three times a week.

*Would it kill the guy to be at least a little more docile and easier to grasp—?*

“What are you staring at, Tsujimura? Do you actually want to become my maid? Is that it? Then go get changed. Your uniform is over there.”

“No, I don’t!”

But this was the kind of person he was. There was no telling where the joke started and where it ended.

*And what’s he doing with a maid outfit anyway? Did he purchase it himself?*

“Then what are you looking at me like that for? I understand that you’re supposed to keep an eye on me, but a security camera would be much more effective. It’d also be cheaper than paying you to watch me all day, and it wouldn’t babble on and on, to boot.”

“I’m aware. But a security camera can’t pester you for reports.”

“And that’s your added value, huh?”

“Just shut up and get me that report.”

“My, my...”

Detective Ayatsuji turned to his desk and began writing a report detailing the previous day’s case: the chain of events, the evidence he’d found, how he’d used it to identify the killer. Even the slightest details were vital for analyzing the mechanism behind the detective’s skill and what activated it; that’s exactly why the Division had him write these reports after every case.

Of course, it was my job to compile and submit all the paperwork. After every case, we had to negotiate with all those involved, consult with the military and city police, and then collect NDAs. At any rate, the detective was right. My job wasn’t being a security camera. My job was to oversee day-to-day operations, drive and guard the detective when he went out, and at times, act as his assistant when necessary to solve cases. It wasn’t like I had much of a choice, either. There was no one else who could do it, after all.

Therefore, I took a seat in a wicker chair, where I could still see Detective Ayatsuji out of the corner of my eye, and began inputting data on my laptop. A good agent could handle paperwork, monitor the detective’s every move, and guard him—but a top-class agent could execute all three tasks perfectly. The protagonist in that spy movie would say the same thing.

Incidentally, someone had proposed installing security cameras in Detective Ayatsuji’s agency, just like what the detective himself said to me. In fact, I heard some actually had been set up here, but Detective Ayatsuji broke most of them while making it look like an accident. He used the remaining cameras for his own purposes, so eventually, the entire idea got tossed out the window. That was this man in a nutshell.

The calico cat rubbed against my ankles a few times as it passed by.

“Finished.”

Detective Ayatsuji placed his fountain pen down, stood up, and handed me a stack of papers.



"You're finished?" I repeated. "Already? Did you make sure to include every last detail?"

"Isn't it your job to check and make sure?"

I began to go through his report one page at a time...then stopped at a certain page.

"Wait," I said. "This last paragraph... What's this about?"

An ominous passage caught my attention. All of a sudden, I got an eerie taste in my mouth.

"It's not a riddle. What's the problem? I thought reading was your forte, Agent Tsujimura."

"I *will* punch you," I growled. "Anyway, I'm talking about this here."

I pointed at a single line in the report.

*I would never be caught!* He said so himself!

"The murderer said this...?" I wondered aloud.

The detective drew smoke into his mouth through his pipe, then slowly exhaled through his faintly parted lips. "You were there, too," he replied.

"He threw me against the wall when he tried to escape. Remember?" I told him. "But I do vaguely remember him yelling something while he ran..."

My stomach did flips. It was like I'd just touched something rough and grainy in the dark, but I still had no idea if it was an elephant's skin or the fangs of a terrifying monster.

"It was quite an indicative remark, yes. What of it?"

Detective Ayatsuji went back to his book.

"Don't give me that," I spat. "Doesn't this mean there's another person who knew about the crime beforehand?"

He didn't respond but instead quietly turned the page.

"The city police searched his house after the incident, but it was strange. They found shockingly little to no proof that he'd planned the murder. Poisoning

usually requires research, but his internet history was clean, and he'd never visited the library, either. In fact—"

"After a certain date, the teacher's personal phone records went blank, along with all records of his after-work activity," the detective interjected. "Right?"

I could tell my breathing was becoming shallower. He was exactly right.

"...Yes, there's nothing from his final twelve days. You noticed?"

"Botulinum is one of the most potent toxins found in nature; making use of it for evil deeds requires specific expertise. You need to know how to culture it, store it, and apply the right dosage to keep it from dying out before the victim ingests it. And then you need to time it just right so that the bacteria can multiply into a lethal dose. It's practically an art. No Japanese-language teacher could come up with all that on his own."

Detective Ayatsuji glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. It was a sharp, icy gaze, reminiscent of an ice age.

"So? What conclusion did the Division reach?" he asked me.

"First, I want to hear your opinion, Detective Ayatsuji."

He chugged the last bit of coffee in his cup and replied, "He must have had an accomplice. No...not an accomplice. An instigator—someone who taught him everything and pulled him down the path of evil."

"An instigator..."

"Not only that, but they also erased any evidence of the crime and made sure to hide anything that would make them seem suspicious or even coincidentally hint that there was some sort of grand scheme. A 'tutor of evil,' someone who took care to instruct this man on how to commit the perfect crime. I don't know who this person is yet...but we can surmise when they made contact with the murderer, yes?"

I almost automatically responded when I saw the look in his eyes. "Twelve days ago..."

"We need to look into everything the murderer did that day. But only if the Division is actually interested in doing the right thing, of course."

I pondered for a few moments.

The man had committed the perfect crime using a naturally occurring toxin. Our investigation revealed that he was motivated by his hatred for the disrespectful student. Hitting the child would get him in trouble for abuse, so the culprit was extremely frustrated. He had the most mundane motive, something almost any teacher could sympathize with. But most teachers wouldn't go so far as to fatally poison a child.

If only he'd never been taught how to commit the perfect murder...

"Twelve days ago..." I said as I checked the data on my laptop. "There's nothing particularly strange about the info we do have. After work, he ate dinner at his usual nearby greasy spoon. His car's GPS showed that he got a little lost on the way home, but he took a rural route that had nothing but a barn and a well. It's hard to believe anything happened there. And that's the last of the car and phone records we got on him."

"I'm impressed. The devil works fast, but the Division works faster."

"Oh, thanks."

"The agents other than you, I mean," he added flatly.

I frowned. "Detective Ayatsuji."

"What?"

"If you knew there was an instigator...why didn't you tell us?"

"You're right. That was careless of me. You have my sincere apologies," he said with a shrug. "By the way, is it just me, or are your people always repeating the same lines? 'Don't go beyond your orders.' 'Don't pursue unassigned cases.' 'Just stay on your leash and carry out your work, and be a good dog while awaiting further orders.' Yesterday, I solved a murder case I was assigned. I identified the killer as ordered, and my skill condemned him. What more do you want? Or..."

"'Or'...?"

He glared into space for a few moments in silence as if he would never say another word. Perhaps the missing continuation of his rant was destined to

forever aimlessly float in space.

“Did you mention a ‘well’?”

“Huh?”

I had no idea what he was getting at.

“A *well*? Not a water reservoir or a simple pit? An actual well? You said he drove home on a road that had a well, right?” he asked rapid-fire.

I was taken aback. “Y-yes... I did, but...uh... What does that...?”

The detective suddenly hopped out of his chair and began marching forward without even glancing in my direction.

“Detective...?”

“Shut up.”

I felt like I’d been stabbed with an icicle. I kept what I was going to say to myself.

Detective Ayatsuji strode across the room and disappeared behind the door in the back of the office. I then heard his footsteps echoing down a staircase.

“Hey! Detective?”

That was when I remembered that those stairs led to the basement. I wasn’t supposed to take my eyes off the detective under any circumstances, so I hid my anxiety, stood up, and ran after him.

The black cat, now alone, meowed disinterestedly.

This wasn’t my first time here. I knew the layout of this building like the back of my hand. On the off chance that there was ever an attack or if I ever needed to know where the blind spots were for sniping, I memorized where the thickest walls were and the shortest route to the back door. I had personally investigated each room at least once—the least I could do as a professional.

The basement still creeped me out, though.

After descending the staircase and stepping inside, a cold breeze immediately brushed past my ankles before slipping away. The dim basement had a low ceiling, and it contained dolls of various sizes: antiques, replicas, ball-jointed

dolls, the works. Some were small and made out of fabric and cotton, while others were life-size and so detailed that they looked like they were going to start moving at any moment. They all had their eyes closed and were sitting on the couch or in their case. There were even a few Japanese-style dolls on display.

The dim lighting must have been to prevent the dolls' finish from discoloring. The floor was spotless, not a single speck of dust. Cold air was being pumped into the room, too.

Although I hadn't been at this job for long, there was one thing I could say with confidence. Out of all the murder cases I'd seen, this was by far the most fitting location for a bizarre, grotesque murder.

The detective had his eyes closed. He was sitting in a sturdy wooden chair in the back with his hands clasped together and his chin resting on the tips of his thumbs. When I approached him to talk, he held up a finger—his way of telling me to be quiet. He apparently didn't want anyone disturbing him while he was deep in thought.

At first, I wanted to give him a piece of my mind, but I thought about it for a moment and decided to cut him some slack. I figured if I did him a favor this time, he'd eventually owe me one.

Instead, I quietly turned around and checked out the dolls. There were beautiful little girls, little boys, and animals—even one curious doll that seemed to be half man, half beast.

These dolls were a hobby of his. Some were rare antiques handmade by famous artists—one of only a few in existence, and thus, highly valuable. Even I could tell that each of these dolls were unique and not mass-produced. But coming from someone who's only here on business, the fact that this man kept a doll sanctuary in his office basement was just downright creepy.

According to Detective Ayatsuji, *"Dolls are far more intriguing than people. You never grow sick of them."*

*Yikes.*

"I just remembered," the detective blurted out. He opened his eyes and

seemed to focus on a single point in space. “Three days ago, at night, in an alley two blocks down the street, there was a tabloid magazine tossed away by the parking-lot dumpster.”

“Dumpster...? Tabloid?” I curiously tilted my head. “What does that have to do with this?”

“The well, obviously. Surely, you could have figured out that much by yourself,” the detective coldly replied. “I noticed an article in the tabloid when I was passing by. I barely paid it any mind at the time, and I forgot that I’d even seen it until now, but—”

“Wait, wait, wait.” I cut him off in a panic. “I mean, it’s incredible you even remembered an article in a tabloid you glanced at, but three nights ago? What were you doing walking around outside at that hour?! And how?! We have a whole platoon with eyes on the entire building all day long!”

“I was just in the mood for a walk by myself, so I slipped out and did exactly that,” he easily admitted. “Is there a problem?”

I almost fainted.

*How can this guy believe that’s not an issue? It’s a big freaking deal.*

I had seen the list of dangerous skill users before. There was one terrifying man who could shred anything within a few yards of where he was standing simply on a whim, but he was merely a grade 3 skill user—the third person from the bottom of the list. Detective Ayatsuji, meanwhile, was a Special A-Grade Dangerous Skill User—leagues more dangerous. The difference was almost night and day. That was just how much of a threat the detective posed, and yet he’d somehow snuck out for a walk despite the heavy surveillance on him? How in the world—?

“The Division’s surveillance team is extremely talented, but when the sun sets, its glare makes it harder to look inside the building through the window. If you simulate that glare with another glass pane, it’s possible to easily slip out through the window without anyone knowing it’s open.”

I felt dizzy. If I relayed all this to the Division higher-ups, they’d force me to spend the next three days completely overhauling our entire surveillance

system.

“But never mind that.” The detective suddenly changed the subject as if the issue was of little importance. “At any rate, that tabloid had an article about a certain well.”

“And...? What’s so special about that?”

Of course, wells weren’t common around these parts. You would probably have to head toward the mountains to see what remained of the wells that the locals used in the past. Regardless, I found it hard to believe that there was anything significant about a murderer passing by a well.

Of course, the fact that Detective Ayatsuji could remember some tabloid article from three nights ago proved that he had an astonishingly good memory. But why was he so fixated on that article now?

“The tabloid mainly covered street gossip and urban legends. Nothing worth reading. But one part of an article caught my eye—it went along the lines of...”

Detective Ayatsuji paused, then sharpened his gaze as if he were peering into my mind.

“...the well that *turns you evil*.”

He narrowed his eyes at me even more.

“Make a wish before it, and evil will be bestowed upon you by a divine power. No matter what crime you commit, you will never be punished.”

“‘Evil’...?”

I almost wanted to laugh in his face. It sounded ridiculous, like something out of a fairy tale. Besides, who in their right mind would pray to become evil? The concept alone was hilarious.

But I couldn’t laugh. I couldn’t even breathe. The air in the room was so tense that my throat became unbearably dry.

“Tsuji-mura, if you want to uncover the truth,” Detective Ayatsuji began from his chair, his eyes as chilling as ever, “then get permission from the Division. We’re off to find this well. And you never know... There may be evil spirits lurking inside it.”

He faintly smirked.

Detective Ayatsuji ended up being completely right. There actually was a well that turned people who prayed to it evil. And someone had done just that and committed an act of evil.

The detective was right about something else, too. While we were checking the well, we ran into something I could only describe as...

...an evil spirit.

The next day, the Ayatsuji Detective Agency received an official government request to investigate the mysterious well.



## CHAPTER 3

### Marshland Afternoon Cloudy

The old well was near a swamp at the prefectural border. Some may have described it as serene; others would call it creepy. There was no sign of anyone nearby. The only things I could hear besides the thrushes chirping were the nearby trees rustling and the flowing river in front of me.

The well faced a small river at the end of a narrow crossroad. I couldn't help but wonder why they'd decided to dig a well when there was a river right here. It didn't make any sense to me. The well was most likely built a century or two ago, so maybe there wasn't a river here back then? Or maybe the water wasn't drinkable?

The logic behind it wasn't important right now, though. We were here to find out how many murderers had visited this spot.

Detective Ayatsuji and I made our way to this well because of the rumors about it. The journey that led us here, to put it bluntly, hadn't been a walk in the park. First, the detective had ordered me to find the publisher of the tabloid and interview the person who'd written the article. Little did I know that this journalist was going to be extremely talkative and slick. Fortunately, I still ended up getting a decent amount of information out of him.

"Sad to say, but I'm still researching that well," the journalist muttered while sheepishly scratching the back of his head. "I wanted to look into it a little more before writing the article—but I've got a real boss from hell, if ya know what I mean."

He stuck his index fingers up and placed them by his ears. I had no idea what he meant.

We were in the magazine company's lounge. The journalist took a sip of his tea and added, "All I know for sure is that there's something real fishy about

that well by the Mizuha River. Somethin' bad, real bad."

"Bad?" I repeated.

"Real, *real* bad. I didn't mention this bit in the article..." The journalist suddenly lowered his voice and melodramatically leaned forward over the table. "A lawyer friend of mine—don't wanna say his name outta respect for his privacy and whatnot—anyway, he was hired for a murder case. Family of four died in a house fire. Only the husband, who just happened to be out at that time, survived. He ended up becoming a suspect, so he had this friend of mine represent him in court. Case ended up getting dropped due to lack of evidence, though."

I furiously took notes as I listened to his story. A fire, family of four, charges against the husband dropped...

"But later, they went out for a few drinks, and the client apparently told my lawyer buddy that he'd gone to that well. Said this 'giving well' changed him, like he'd been reborn. That was when the lawyer was sure of it: This man killed his own family. Killed them and made it look like they died in a house fire."

"What?!" I cried in spite of myself. "Then why wasn't he found guilty?"

"Because the investigation concluded that their deaths were a complete accident," the journalist said with a shrug. "Said it was a faulty kitchen fire. I got a peek at the report myself through one of my connections, and wow—talk about an open-and-shut case. No evidence of any wrongdoing or nothin'."

I pondered for a few moments.

*No signs of foul play... No one found guilty... It's the perfect crime.*

"The lawyer lost a lot of sleep over it, too." The journalist wore a troubled frown. "After all, he had to honor confidentiality, even though his client had murdered his own family. Of course, my lawyer buddy's already accepted long ago that this is simply the nature of his work. Anyway, he somehow managed to get his client drunk enough to admit what he'd done. I dunno if the guy felt guilty or what, but he basically confessed."

"I see. And what exactly did that man do at the well?"

“Really wish I could help ya there...but my buddy wasn’t able to get that information out of the guy. Sure, he was the man’s lawyer, but no way the guy was gonna spill exactly how he’d forged a pact with this well to murder his family.”

“Where is this client now?”

“I looked into it, but the guy fled town after he got acquitted. Nobody knows where he went.”

That probably meant that finding him would be difficult...which meant that investigating the well itself would be the best place to start.

“But the fella did say something else, I hear,” he solemnly added. “It’s a well, but it’s also not a well. He called it a minishrine.”

“A shrine?”

That wasn’t something I was expecting to hear.

“You’re supposed to, like...offer it something. Pray to it seeking purification or whatever, and it’ll turn you into an evildoer.”

“It turns you into an evildoer...”

“The guy used to be a fireman. Saving people from fire, only to torch his own family...,” the journalist added with a gloomy expression. “Investigator.”

“Yes?”

Members of the Special Division for Unusual Powers were allowed to go by other titles during investigations. Right now, I was a special inspector for the military police.

“Please make things right. I might be a hack journalist who barely has two nickels to rub together, but even I know that this can’t be swept under the rug because there’ll be other victims. That much I’m sure of. So please do something before a real monster is born.”

Not knowing how to even respond to that, I hopelessly watched as the journalist placed his hands on the table and bowed for a few moments. Then I reluctantly assured him that I would make things right.

“...And that’s what happened.”

“I see,” Detective Ayatsuji replied indifferently after I filled him in.

“How did I do, Detective? Pretty impressive that I got all this information in a day’s time, right?”

“Yeah, impressively useless. I bet all you did was question this man. He basically rambled the entire time from the sound of it. What was his name?”

“I think it was Tori-something...”

“Can I get a round of applause for our incredible investigator?”

Before I could even argue with the detective, he had already started to briskly walk ahead. Obviously, I started to follow him...but then I immediately stopped.

The trees were rustling. The air was a little chilly. There wasn’t another soul at this well, but I still couldn’t help but feel like I was being watched. I started walking faster to catch up with the detective and rid myself of this creepy sensation.

“Hmph...,” the detective grunted before the well. “Intriguing.”

I peeked over the detective’s shoulder. The old concrete well was falling apart. The outside was wrapped with two decomposing *shimenawa* ropes, which made it seem somewhat religious. However, that was the only thing special about it. There wasn’t any secret password written anywhere, nor was there any mysterious creature with some sort of skill. In fact, I didn’t sense any skills. I wasn’t as talented as my seasoned mentor, but I was still a member of the Special Division. I knew how to sniff out special powers to an extent, so I could say with confidence that this was nothing more than an ordinary old well.

“A well at a crossroad by the river... Now things are getting interesting,” Detective Ayatsuji muttered to himself before pointing at the base of the well.

“Are those...bamboo leaves?” I said.

I approached the well and crouched. The ground was muddy from the rain and wind, but there was no doubt about it. These were large bamboo leaves.

“How many are there?” the detective asked me.

“One, two... Four, in total.”

“Four?” He frowned. “See anything else unusual down there?”

“Uh...”

I bent forward to observe the well, but all I could see around the bamboo leaves was mud. There was some black gravel speckled about here and there, and some large violet stones as well, but that was about it. I even peered into the well, which was considerably deep. To make matters worse, the branches overhead were blocking out the sun, making it hard to see the bottom. But I did notice that the old well had dried out long ago; it was empty except for some mud.

“That’s about it...I think.”

“That’s it? I guess that’s all you’re capable of,” the detective griped without batting an eye. “Take a better look at those purple stones. The ones by the river are pointier. You’d only see stones this worn farther downstream. Somebody must have brought these here.”

“What?”

I approached the stones and scrutinized them further. The ones near the bamboo leaves did indeed seem to be different. They were oddly round...and roughly the size of a human eye.

“How many are there in total?” Detective Ayatsuji asked.

“Uh... Six. I see six,” I replied after counting them with my fingers.

I searched a little farther from the well just to be sure, but those six were all of the stones.

For the next few moments, the detective stared off into space, until he suddenly asked, “Is there any salt?”

“Salt?”

*Like the kind you eat?*

I thought about asking him that, but I figured he would just insult me again. Instead, I kept my mouth shut and shifted my gaze toward the ground.

*Salt...? All the way out here?*

It had rained a few days ago—I couldn't remember when exactly—so even the bamboo leaves were filthy. If there was any salt here, the rain would have buried it under the mud.

"I can't tell." I shook my head. "Why salt, though?"

"Seriously? What else goes with bamboo leaves and stones?"

I was just as confused as he was frustrated. What *did* salt have to do with bamboo leaves and stones? I was sure they had to be related somehow, like the detective claimed, yet I couldn't help but be confused.

After a brief sigh, Detective Ayatsuji softly recited, "'Be as the bamboo leaves, as green as they are. Wilted, as faded as they are. Once more, be like the salt, swelling and ebbing away. Like the rock, sinking and sinking.'"

He fell silent. A cold gust of wind whirled around him before passing by.

"What's that...?" I asked.

"The context makes it pretty obvious that it's a curse, right? The middle volume of the *Kojiki* tells the tale of the deity Akiyama-no-shitabi-otoko and a promise he failed to keep with his younger brother. Their mother becomes enraged and crafts a charm out of bamboo leaves, stones, and salt to inflict a curse upon the elder brother. He spends eight years languishing in illness and only recovers after begging his mother for forgiveness."

"He should have apologized sooner, then," I bluntly stated, saying what was on my mind. "But isn't the *Kojiki* over a thousand years old? What does it have to do with this well?"

"You always ask the wrong questions. What's important isn't how they're related. The *intent* is what's important, and we need to check for salt before we can answer that."

"But how are we supposed to find any salt if we can't see—?"

"Don't ask questions you already know the answer to." The detective coldly glared down at me. "What do you think that tongue of yours is for? Start licking."

...What? The leaves?

He apparently noticed the look of disgust on my face, because his lips curled into a smug smirk.

For a brief moment—a split second—I considered requesting a job transfer.

The bamboo leaves were unsanitary, covered in mud and who knew what else? It didn't help that I couldn't remove any of it, either, since I needed to check for salt.

I lifted a leaf and glared at it as if it were my archnemesis. That was when I suddenly had an epiphany.

“Oh, hey,” I muttered. “How about we send this to forensics for testing?”

“You used your brain for a change.”

Detective Ayatsuji clicked his tongue with undeniable disappointment.

We continued to search the area around the well for clues, but not only were there no footsteps or belongings, there were also no signs of anyone ever having been here recently. It was all bamboo leaves and stones.

Was this well truly a shrine that could turn ordinary people into murderers? It wasn't comforting that our one clue was a passage from the *Kojiki*.

As I surveyed the area, I glanced at the detective out of the corner of my eye. He was neither using a magnifying glass nor smoking from a pipe while deep in thought. Instead, he was simply tracing his finger around the rim of the well. He looked more like an architect gazing at his work than a detective. After a few moments, he pulled out a pocket watch and held it up to the sun.

He then extended his arm over the well as if he was trying to get a read on a spiritual presence. He remained perfectly still.

“Can you feel some sort of energy?” I asked. “Since when did you become a medium anyway?”

“Detective work would be much easier with spiritual powers.” His piercing gaze shot through me. “But nothing that convenient actually exists. Only the living can kill the living. In *most cases*, at least.”

“...?”

I promptly looked back at him, perplexed, but as always, his chilling expression didn't change. He stared at the well in silence for a few more moments, then out of nowhere, he turned around and began walking away.

“D-Detective Ayatsuji?” I stammered.

“We're done here. Let's go.”

“We're leaving...?” I rushed after him in a fluster. “But this is our only lead. Did you figure something out?”

“Nope. I'm at a complete loss.”

“You're giving up?”

I was taken aback. I never expected to hear him say something like that.

“Yep.”

I picked up the pace, but the detective had a wide stride, so he covered a lot of ground even when at his normal gait. I had to basically jog to make sure I didn't get left behind.

I always believed that the detective didn't even know what giving up was, and I never expected we would ever leave without a single clue, either. But Detective Ayatsuji seemed to have lost all interest in the well. He walked into the distance, so I had no choice but to follow him.

We got into the car and went straight back to town, but the entire time, he kept his gaze forward as if he was staring at something. I couldn't help but curiously glance in his direction while I drove, wondering what he was thinking about. Perhaps he was simply frustrated that he couldn't find any clues. Maybe things like that happened to him from time to time. The root of great evil was right in front of us, but there was nothing we could do to reach it. Any potential clues remained hidden. Not even the gods knew the facts. Maybe this was just one of those days.

“Don't beat yourself up over it,” I cheerfully suggested. “I'll have forensics look into this... Besides, blaming those crimes on that well doesn't even make any sense. It was just an ordinary old well. I even looked through the Division's



records, and there was nothing about a skill that turns people evil. I'm sure we'll find other leads—"

"Other leads?" the detective suddenly muttered. "Tsujimura, do you honestly believe there are other leads? That well is the first and last clue we'll get. The reason being that it's a well."

"What does that even mean...?" I tilted my head, my hands still on the steering wheel. "There are plenty of wells around the country. What makes this one so special?"

That reminded me: Why did he react so sensitively to the word *well*? Of course, I was interested in checking that well out because that journalist was so convinced it had something to do with the murders. But that was about the extent of my curiosity. The two murderers—the one from that school trip and the one who burned down his house and killed his family—had just happened to pass by the same well. That was nowhere near enough information to claim that this well was the root of all evil.

"Because bad things often come from wells," he said with a faint scowl. "That's why."

"Bad things...? But..."

The journalist had said something similar.

"Are you familiar with the tale of the Dish Mansion?" the detective suddenly asked.

"Oh, uh... That old scary story?" I rummaged through my memories for details. "The one about a ghost who counts dishes every night only to find that there's one missing."

"That's it. I'm no expert on the subject, so this is merely secondhand knowledge I obtained from a *certain man*, but the Dish Mansion was a common ghost story in both Kabuki and ballad dramas. There's one from Himeji and Edo, along with various other strange tales all across Japan like in Tosa, Izumo, and Amagasaki."

"O-oh...really?"

I had no idea that the legend had cropped up almost simultaneously across Japan. The country must've had a serious plate shortage back in the day.

"There is a common thread that runs along all these variations of the story: The ghost always emerges from a well. It never appears anywhere else. There are numerous other tales of ghosts emerging from wells, too. Many customs even deify wells. Some regions consider them sacred structures for worshipping water deities such as Mizuhanome. It was also widely believed that wells were a passageway between the spirit realm and ours. A Heian-era legend claims that the eminent imperial court official Ono no Takamura traveled every night through the realm of the dead via a well and into the depths of hell to assist Yama, the god of death."

*So a bureaucrat who moonlighted as a death god's aide... Sounds like a real hard worker, in modern parlance.*

"This particular well is at the end of a crossroad by a river on the prefectural border. It's a boundary—a connection between two worlds, the source of numerous ancient ghost stories. In other words—a place where bad things come from."

"So what you're trying to say is...there's something shady about that well?"

"At the very least, there is plenty to be suspicious about."

I tilted my head. "Do you mean some ghost is behind all this? One that grants evil to those who offer it a prayer and then possesses them to commit murder...?"

That sent a shiver down my spine. I honestly didn't want to work on this case anymore.

He shot me down in his usual tone. "Don't be ridiculous."

I was actually somewhat relieved.

"There's no such thing as ghosts or the afterlife. At the very least, they have nothing to do with this case. I'm saying the criminal set this up to *look like they're related*."

"Somebody's trying to make it seem like a ghost is behind this...?"

“Yes.” The detective stared out the window. *“This person has a thing for wells.”*

There was a mastermind behind this who liked wells and was making it seem like there was a ghost. I had a faint feeling that was the case, and there was no way I was going to miss my chance to ask the detective about it.

“Detective Ayatsuji, have you already...identified the criminal and the details of the crime?”

He didn’t immediately reply.

The light in front of us turned red, so I firmly pressed the brake. Several cars passed through the intersection.

But once the light turned green, the detective finally spoke up.

“Fear of the unknown—that’s what makes ghosts and spirits so frightening. There’s nothing mysterious about predictable setups and behavior. That’s the difference between skills and ghosts. Skills are a system and therefore not particularly eerie. The culprit knows this very well and is trying to use this simple fact to their advantage,” the detective explained while tapping his pipe. “I calculated the circumference of the well. One circuit around the rim is approximately ninety-one inches. Divide this by the first three digits of pi, and you get the diameter: roughly twenty-nine inches. Now, if you spread your arms across the rim and adjust your eyes’ position so that the diameter of the bottom of the well and the length of your fingers are the same, then you can triangulate the well’s depth. My thumbs are about two inches long, and my eyes and hands are around thirteen inches apart. A little mental math tells me that the well is about a hundred sixty inches deep. Not an exact number, but close enough.”

I was bewildered, to say the least.

Come to think of it, I did remember him tracing the well with his fingers and holding his hand over it.

So he wasn’t trying to speak with the spirits—he was trying to measure the distance to the bottom. But why...?

“Also, there were six round stones and four bamboo leaves, and those

numbers aren't random. Based on the old twelve-interval time system, the bell would ring four times at the sixth interval, or the snake hour, which gave it the name *the fourth dawn*. That corresponds to around ten o'clock in the morning."

The sixth interval... Four bells... The numbers matched.

"This time of year, the sun is at an angle of about sixty-eight degrees during the snake hour. You remember learning about sine and cosine? The well's diameter is twenty-nine inches, and the depth is a hundred sixty inches. When the sun is shining overhead at a sixty-eight-degree angle, light can reach eighty-eight inches into the well. Search the vicinity during the snake hour tomorrow. There's bound to be something."

I couldn't reply immediately. Detective Ayatsuji didn't look like he'd been doing anything back at the well, but it turned out that he'd been calculating all this in his head.

"But why would someone plant that kind of a gimmick at a well?"

"To add to the mystery and make it seem magical, of course. Call it a behind-the-scenes trick, if you will. Fear makes the wolf bigger than he is, after all. What did that journalist say about the well?"

"Um..." I thought back to our conversation before answering, "He said it was a minishrine that turns its visitors evil."

"This is the trick I mentioned." He closed his eyes. "It's a code—the well doesn't grant evil; it's a test to see who has the knowledge and courage to commit evil. A hint eighty-eight inches into the well leads to the next location and yet another puzzle, and only after clearing the last obstacle do you learn how to commit the so-called perfect crime. Anyone who goes through all that trouble will need the right equipment and the wherewithal to get themselves and one other person covered in mud. That requires guts, brains, and desperation. But when you really think about it, that's the exact kind of person who can figure out the hints to commit the perfect crime...and become 'evil' itself."

I was utterly dumbfounded.

The well was neither a shrine nor a gate to the spirit world but a testing

ground? In other words, all the murderers had overcome these obstacles? Of course, anyone who passed wouldn't tell a soul about the test—otherwise, it wouldn't be the perfect crime anymore, and blabbing ran the risk of someone turning you in. That must be why it was nothing more than vague rumors. Everyone who went to this well committed acts of evil, but the rest of what happened was unknown.

“We need to solve the riddle of the well's perfectly designed system,” Detective Ayatsuji said. “Then we have to stop whatever its creator is trying to accomplish. If we don't act quickly, we'll see more cases like the botulinum poisoning—unsolved crimes will spread like a contagion. We have to find out who's behind this and what they're after as soon as possible, or this country's murder rate will multiply by the hundreds.”

As his prediction eerily resonated within the car, I found my entire body overcome with itchy anxiety. Who made this system and for what reason? There were countless important questions swelling in my chest.

“Wait...”

But what I ended up asking was far from important.

“You gave up on investigating the well earlier...but now I can't help wondering... You just didn't want to get yourself muddy, did you?!”

“Take one of your colleagues with you tomorrow and get your hands dirty.” He smiled ever so slightly. “I look forward to your performance, Ms. Detective's Assistant.”

\*

Yukito Ayatsuji was walking down a narrow alleyway. No words were spoken, nor was there anyone for him to even share a word with. The sky was blue, and the tall buildings were even bluer. Wispy streaks of clouds roamed across the sky at the same pace as the withered leaves drifting west.

Ayatsuji's eyes were cold. Even the sunlight reflecting off the buildings couldn't warm them. After he turned the corner, he took a path next to what was left of an old, seedy construction site. The Division's sniper team must be losing their mind right now, since the Special A-Grade Dangerous Skill User whom they were supposed to be watching had disappeared yet again. After all,

it was only the other day that they'd taken steps to prevent their target from escaping through the window with the double-window trick, so someone was probably going to lose their job. And yet, Ayatsuji had still snuck out. That was just how important this was.

It was a gut feeling that he couldn't ignore.

Standing tall on his right side was a wire-mesh fence most likely there to prevent people from stealing machinery from the construction site. Coiled around the top of the fence was barbed wire; not even someone as tall as Ayatsuji would be able to clear it safely.

There were no signs of anyone in the construction site. Ayatsuji was the only one walking this path. Even when he passed *that place*, there was nobody there.

"It's been a while, Ayatsuji," came a voice from the depths of hell. "Marvelous job on that well case."

But Ayatsuji didn't turn around. He stopped in his tracks, slowly blinked twice, took in a deep breath, then exhaled. He clenched his fists, opened them again, and closed his eyes...because he needed time to get the words out.

"So it was your doing after all... Do you have any idea how much I despised quoting the *Kojiki*?"

Ayatsuji looked to his side. Sitting there was a dimpled-cheeked man wearing ragged, traditional Japanese attire, with a millennium of knowledge behind his mud-brown eyes. He possessed no shadow as if he was some sort of ghost from where he sat on the other side of the fence atop an old, moss-covered rock.

"I'm glad my class came in handy for you," the older gentleman said with the calmest of smiles.

"You never cease to disgust me, Kyougoku." Ayatsuji narrowed his gaze. "How about I call the Division and have one of their platoons throw you an exclusive fireworks show?"

Ayatsuji grabbed onto the mesh fence and glared at the man. The metal creaked and vibrated.

“You know how pointless that would be, Ayatsuji,” Kyougoku said, cackling. “I came here prepared, you see. I’m too much of a coward not to.”

Ayatsuji narrowed his eyes even more. “You said it atop that waterfall—that compared with your so-called ceremony, the battle up until now was only the unveiling. And then you threw yourself off the cliff.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Indeed, I was quaking in my boots then. It was my first taste of death, after all.” Kyougoku serenely smiled.

The battle between Yukito Ayatsuji and Natsuhiko Kyougoku had reached its conclusion two months ago at the top of the waterfall—or at least, it should have. There was no way to escape Ayatsuji’s skill, which killed criminals through various accidents without fail, and yet...here Kyougoku was.

“...”

Ayatsuji quietly observed the shadowy figure on the other side of the fence. If any ordinary person had seen Ayatsuji right now, their intestines would begin to convulse, sending them into violent fits of vomiting. His eyes didn’t hide his murderous intent, which was as sharp as a carefully prepared scythe.

“It seems killing you isn’t going to be enough to stop you.” Ayatsuji wasn’t even attempting to hide his hostility. A chill escaped his throat, practically freezing the air and shattering it. “Very well. I’ll play your little game, Sorcerer. Let’s see what this ‘ceremony’ is all about. It should keep me entertained for at least a short while.”

“That’s the spirit,” Kyougoku replied, smirking once more. Then he seemed to have remembered something. “Countless human lives are resting on your efforts. Do keep up the hard work.”

If the man who created this system wasn’t stopped, then the rate of homicides in this country would surely increase until it was hundreds of times higher than any other country in the world.

Ayatsuji thought back to what he’d told Tsujimura. He had to find out what Kyougoku was after, uncover what this so-called ceremony was, and stop him. Only then could he finally put this feud between them to rest.

“Have you heard of the *mizuchi*?” Kyougoku suddenly asked with a raised

eyebrow.

“The ‘*mizuchi*’?”

“The oldest account claims it is a dragon-like beast that resides near the Kawashima River in the ancient province of Kibi. It also appears in Volume Sixteen of the *Man’yōshū* in Prince Sakaibe’s poem as well as in the *Wajinden*. The creature takes various names and forms, but it is essentially a sort of water-dwelling serpent or a semidragon that resides in water. That will be your next opponent.”

“A serpent?” Ayatsuji muttered an octave lower. “Are you saying a snake is going to kill someone?”

“Precisely. Sounds exciting, yes?” Kyougoku shrugged. “*The next sacrifice will be devoured by the mizuchi that crawls out of that well*. This is what you might call a harbinger of murder. What will you do, Homicide Detective? Not even you are capable of slaying such a monstrous creature.”

He was announcing the next victim. A serpent was going to slither out of the well and eat someone.

“Of course, it had to be a well.” Ayatsuji sighed and closed his eyes. “So there’s yet another killer who was gifted that wisdom of yours.”

“Perhaps.”

“You disgust me,” Ayatsuji spat. “Very well. Allow me to give you a warning of my own. Next time, I’ll take much more care in killing you.”

“High praise, coming from you.” Kyougoku grinned with clear amusement. “Now, allow me to usher in a couple of guests to launch this new little game of ours. Consider it a small token from me to you. Turn around.”

Ayatsuji quickly did an about-face and noticed a shadowy figure in the back of the alleyway—two shadowy figures: a man and a woman, each with pistols in their trembling hands.

“A-are you—Mr. Ayatsuji?” the man asked.

Ayatsuji didn’t reply.

Standing there were a man wearing a suit and glasses and a woman with



shoulder-length hair. Both looked to be in their late thirties or so—two average, everyday people. They had rings on their left ring fingers, so it was safe to assume that they were married.

“Yousuke, I...I can’t do it,” the woman stammered. She wiped the tears running down her cheeks with her hand that was holding the gun.

“Don’t worry, Ritsuko. There’s nothing to be afraid of. We just need to do as we were told,” the man replied, trying to smile through his tears, his breathing shallow.

Ayatsuji observed the couple and immediately reached a single conclusion. *They didn’t come here to shoot him.* They were here because—

“Drop your weapons,” Ayatsuji growled.

“A man who never told us his name...paid for an operation one of our daughters needed,” the trembling man explained through clenched teeth. “And then he said that he’d pay for our other daughter’s surgery if we did exactly as he told us.”

“Yousuke, I’m so s-scared. I really can’t...” The wife closed her eyes, tears dripping off her chin.

“It’s okay, Ritsuko. We chose to do this for our children, didn’t we?” the husband assured her. “Come on... Let’s do it.”

The shivering couple standing right before Ayatsuji...*pointed their pistols at the other’s head.*

“Stop,” Ayatsuji demanded, baring his teeth and stepping forward. Swirling in his eyes was rage unlike anything he had ever felt before. “Drop your weapons. This is nothing more than a game to that man. He’s playing with your lives.”

“We know,” said the husband. The couple smiled as they wept and trembled. “But this isn’t a game to us. Ready, Ritsuko?”

“Oh God... Yes, I’m ready...”

They tightly shut their eyes.

“Don’t...!” Ayatsuji shouted. He dashed forward, reaching for their guns. But he was too late.

The couple simultaneously pulled their triggers, shooting the other in the head.

Dark-red blood and brain matter littered the alleyway and painted the walls a fresh crimson. The couple, who'd each lost half of their face, had flown in opposite directions from the impact before promptly dropping to the ground. All that remained were lifeless sacks of meat, leaving only Ayatsuji's long, still shadow.

"Blood is without substance, and thus a thing of beauty. Even more so if it sprays forth in a crimson blizzard born of love."

"Kyougoku...!!"

"I'm a researcher, so of course, I looked into your skill thoroughly. It can't recognize 'someone who paid for surgery' as a criminal, can it now?"

Ayatsuji punched the fence as hard as he could, but Kyougoku had already vanished.

"Yes, that's the face, Ayatsuji... *That's* the face I wanted to see. Until we meet again. Do look forward to my sorcery."

Kyougoku's voice echoed down the alleyway before eventually vanishing as well. Ayatsuji stood alone in silence, squeezing the fence so hard that his hands began to bleed.

Dark-red blood slowly filled the alleyway.

\*

The news almost instantly reached the Special Division, so I was summoned to the Ministry of Home Affairs and forced to explain. Of course, there wasn't a single question I could answer. I had no idea that monster, Kyougoku, was still alive. He was supposed to have fallen to his death—how was he still breathing? His body was never found, but numerous organizations had conducted thorough investigations, and no one could've survived a fall from the top of that waterfall.

Kyougoku should have died at the hands of Detective Ayatsuji's skill—in a fatal "accident." Nobody had ever escaped his skill before.

My mentor, Sakaguchi, had been wearing a stern expression in silence ever

since we stepped inside the Ministry of Home Affairs' white building. Only after leaving and returning to our base did he finally say a word to me:

“Start gathering as much information as you can.”

And that was it. I told him I would get it done, and I meant it. After all, I did have an idea on how I could get some more information.

Eighteen hours after that, I was at a sewage-treatment plant in the suburbs. With a stack of documents in one hand, I leaned against the wall. The place was quiet, and only the large moving machinery filled that void of silence.

Modern sewage plants were very clean. Not only did it lack the putrid smell of foul water, but the walls weren't splattered with filth, either. The place was hygienic, simplistic, and completely empty. The closest worker was in an office about a mile away and controlling the sewage treatment through a computer, which meant there was no need for any on-site staff.

It was the perfect place for a secret rendezvous. There was no one else in this hallway, no spots that could be bugged, no place to hide and eavesdrop. The only things that stood out were the chemical transport pipes halfway buried into the wall. Other than that, the place was bare.

It felt almost like I was in a spy movie, which gave me goose bumps. Maybe I wouldn't have felt so anxious if this really was a movie, though. In spy films, the hero always defeated evil in the end. The sole difference between these movies was how the hero won.

But my situation was far different. I couldn't even picture myself defeating that monster.

I heard clicking footsteps in the distance.

“Quite the place you chose,” joked a cold, deep voice. “Only an also-ran focuses on the backdrop, Ms. Secret Agent.”

A shadowy figure appeared from behind the door down the hallway.

“Detective Ayatsuji,” I muttered.

“You should thank your colleagues a little more. Did you not even consider how much your sniper unit would panic the moment they realized that I left the

agency alone and took a taxi? This better be worth it.”

“We found a code inside the well,” I reported, lifting up the files in my hand.

“Oh?”

I saw him raise an eyebrow behind his sunglasses.

After opening the folder, I showed him the files and continued, “You were right. There were three thin, deep cracks in the well that are only visible in the late morning, when there’s enough sunlight overhead to see that far down. Stuffed inside each crack were pieces of plastic I managed to pull out with some tweezers. Each piece had several tiny numbers written on them. I have some enhanced photos of them here.”

I pointed at a page in the documents, which the detective immediately grabbed to take a closer look.

978-0-.

5-19-1.

198-57.

Those were the combinations found on the pieces of plastic in the photograph that Detective Ayatsuji was staring at. He narrowed his eyes.

“I disposed of all the plastic in the well, so that should put an end to the ‘perfect’ crimes. I also have surveillance on the well now—”

“That won’t help,” the detective cut in. “I highly doubt that’s the only well. There are probably multiple other haunted locations, too.”

“‘Haunted’?”

“Yes.” He shot me a brief but sharp glance. “At least, he has a reason for wanting people to think they’re haunted. Reasons that are still unknown to me.”

I nodded. There was no way to comprehend what that phantom was thinking. All I knew was that we couldn’t let him get away with this, or there would be more victims.

“These pieces of plastic must be some sort of code, right?” I said.

“Right.”

“And deciphering them should bring us one step closer to catching him, right?”

“Right.”

“The Division’s cryptanalysis team is working on deciphering the code, and they’re using special software on it as we speak. But they haven’t solved it yet. It should only take them a few more days, though.”

“A few days?” Detective Ayatsuji lifted his head. “I’ve already figured it out.”

“Huh?” I couldn’t even process what he was saying at first. “Already...? As in just now?”

“Why are you all bug-eyed like a goldfish? It wasn’t that hard.” He flicked the photo in the files. “Don’t overthink it. Use your brain a little.”

I looked down at the code once more.

978-0-

5-19-1.

198-57.

Each code had been hidden in a different crack in the well, and this might not even be the correct order. They could be independent of one another, or they could even be combined into a single succession of digits.

I’d briefly attempted to crack the code when I first saw the files, but absolutely nothing came to mind. “5-19-1” could’ve been a date and time—May 19 at one o’clock—but the others didn’t look like dates at all. *Maybe it’s an alphabetic cipher?* The “5” would be *e*, “19” would be *s*, and the “1” would be *a*. But then...what would that make “198-57”? There weren’t that many letters in the alphabet, so that obviously wasn’t the right answer...

“People love code-deciphering games, but their biggest mistake is thinking that all codes can be solved with the same technique. Here, give me the files again,” Detective Ayatsuji softly demanded as he took the papers out of my hand. “This is a single, unique combination of digits. The ‘978-0-’ part ends with a hyphen—highly unusual, which made it easy to figure out that it was the first

set of digits. By the way, the correct order is '978-0-', '198-57,' '5-19-1.' All you need now is a little knowledge." He then pointed at one of the photos. "Everything comes down to the first '978.' It makes sense that a Japanese-language teacher managed to figure it out. This is the prefix added to the ISBN codes in every published book."

"'Book'? Like...the kind you read?"

"What other kinds are there?" he replied while shooting me a cold glance. "This is an international standard book number. No two books share the same one. ISBNs used to be composed of ten digits, but in 2007, that was changed to thirteen digits out of concern that they would run out of unique numbers. Those three extra digits are '978.' Almost all recent books have these printed on the back cover over the barcode."

"Then this code sequence..."

"It corresponds to a book with the ISBN 978-0-198-575-19-1. The first three digits are the prefix that all books have, while the '0' identifies the language—in this case, English. The following '198-575-19' identifies the publisher and title; the '1' at the end of the ISBN is a randomly allocated check digit, which is always a single digit. Therefore, the '5-19-1' sequence had to come at the end. Put simply, this is an ISBN for an English-language book. We should easily be able to find it if we search online."

I hastily pulled out my cell phone and contacted the Division. It took only a few seconds to prove that the detective was right. I promptly thanked my colleague and hung up.

"All right, we got our book. The publisher is Oxford University Press," I said, facing Detective Ayatsuji. "It's the first edition of *The Selfish Gene* written by Richard Dawkins, published in 1976."

"Oh? Interesting." The detective knitted his brow. "That's a famous educational book on biology... I'm surprised, though. After the incident at the well, I was expecting something on folklore or spiritual traditions."

"What kind of book is it?"

"In the simplest terms, it's a treatise on genes and memes."

“‘Memes’?”

“It’s just basic biology. Genes copy themselves by multiplying, and this information is passed down to the next generation. Memes are replicated by transmission of information and similarly passed down. The book aims to define genes and memes and argue how both of them work.”

*Transmission?*

Genes are passed on from parent to child—that much I understood, but I’d never heard of memes.

“Specifically, with things like religion, culture, language, and ethics. For example, Santa Claus doesn’t really exist; he’s ‘transmitted’ and ‘replicated’ by people and media to the point that you can see and hear about him all across the world just like any living thing. But Santa Claus isn’t transmitted through genes. He’s a ‘life-form’ known as a meme, which replicates and passes down its ‘DNA.’ Religions and cultures remain commonplace for millennia because information can replicate and transmit itself just like DNA. *The Selfish Gene* pioneered this meme theory.”

I nodded. “I think I...somewhat...get the gist, but I’d appreciate it if you could go into a little more detail later.”

He regarded me with a cold stare. “Tsujimura, why do you think I was able to decipher the code so easily? Because I purposefully made sure to remember this information about ISBNs, something that would go in one ear and out the other for most people. This small detail is what makes you and me different. *The Selfish Gene* is a basic educational book that’s been translated into many languages. Give it a read sometime.”

“Ngh.”

After he glared at me for a few more seconds, he asked, “Are you growling?”

“Oh, no. I was just groaning a little out of shame.”

“I see,” the detective replied. “I was worried you were going to start barking at me for a second there.”

Just then, the door that Detective Ayatsuji came through earlier opened.

“Was this our rendezvous point?” asked a man in a suit.

“Inspector Asukai,” I began, facing the man. “Thank you for coming all this way.”

He wore a hat and black leather gloves—it was Inspector Asukai, clasping his hands and approaching us. Despite his burly build, he moved almost silently and carried himself gracefully.

“Sorry I’m late, Tsujimura. I know this doesn’t make up for it, but I brought you a souvenir from Kyoto. I went last week during my time off.”

“Uh...”

He smoothly reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a pack of pickled vegetables, and handed them to me. I instinctively accepted them. The vacuum-sealed pack wasn’t even gift wrapped or in a bag.

“Long time no see, Detective Ayatsuji.”

“Oh, it’s you.”

Inspector Asukai bowed to the detective before pulling out another pack of pickled vegetables like it was nothing.

“A souvenir for you, too, Detective.”

Unfazed, Detective Ayatsuji placed a pipe between his lips. It didn’t look like he was going to accept the gift.

“I’ve finally grown accustomed to your strange antics, but I’m still not a fan of pickled vegetables.”

“Oh my. That so?”

“Yep... The pickles you gave me seventeen months ago weren’t bad, though.”

Inspector Asukai bowed once more and nimbly pulled yet another bag of pickled food from his pocket.

“Here.”

“You have more of them?”

The detective reluctantly accepted it.



*What's going on with those pockets of his?*

"I should've asked you before I got you this souvenir, Tsujimura, but do you have a favorite kind of pickled food?"

Inspector Asukai dug into his pocket as he approached me, so I immediately let him know that I was fine with anything.

"Hmph. So your informant is this fermentation freak?" Detective Ayatsuji said.

"That's right." I nodded. "Inspector Asukai is a special high-level inspector for the military police who's been pursuing Kyougoku cases for years. You could say that he's overseen pretty much everything our investigations into Kyougoku have uncovered."

These top-level agents—they were the real pros who always fought crime on the front lines. Unlike secret organizations like the Special Division for Unusual Powers, which remained and worked behind the scenes, he was a professional who always took command on the front line and went after even the most heinous of criminals, regardless of jurisdiction or turf. It took far more than a little bit of guts and resilience to do what he did.

"Inspector Asukai, I apologize for bothering you when you must be extremely busy, but I have a few questions."

"I'm assuming this has to do with that one case, yeah?" he said, crossing his burly arms. "I heard what happened, Detective Ayatsuji. He's back, huh? It's truly bizarre. I was sure you killed him two months ago at that waterfall."

"Yeah, I killed him, but that's apparently not enough to stop him," the detective quietly replied as he took a puff from his pipe.

"Yes, it's about that," I began. "If you don't mind, Inspector Asukai, could you tell us about the investigation at the waterfall?"

"You're curious? Sure, I'll tell you everything I know." Inspector Asukai narrowed his eyes. "To get straight to the point, we never found a body, but there's no doubt that Kyougoku died."

He paused, then glanced at us to gauge our reaction.

"You never found the body?" Detective Ayatsuji asked.

“That we did not.” Asukai pulled out a cigarette and shifted his gaze to the detective. “Mind if I smoke?”

The detective closed his eyes and lifted his chin just barely enough to make his intentions clear. After receiving the go-ahead, Asukai lit the cigarette and continued:

“I received a call from the Division early the night twelve people died at that museum out of town. They said they found the criminal and needed our help nabbing him, so we immediately surrounded that waterfall based on the information we had. Soon after that, we learned that the man behind these murders, Kyougoku, had fallen off the waterfall.”

I nodded. I could still clearly remember that evening.

It was a horrible incident. Twelve people were locked in a museum and *started killing one another*. One of the twelve was actually a ferocious serial killer who gouged out the eyes of their victims—or at least, that was the false information that the other eleven people were fed. Each one of them began to doubt the other until even the most trivial of matters began to set them off. It wasn't long before the entire situation developed into a bloodbath. Museum security footage showed people killing one another with kitchen knives and fire pokers until only one person remained, but even this last survivor ended up slaughtered.

Ayatsuji figured out Kyougoku was the instigator and chased him down until they had their final encounter at the top of the waterfall. When Kyougoku realized that all was lost, he threw himself off the falls. At least, that was what I was told.

“When I heard that Kyougoku fell off that waterfall, I immediately considered the possibility that this was all some sort of charade to help him escape,” Asukai admitted. His eyes began to focus on the burning tip of his cigarette. “Because you can never be too sure, even if he had fallen off the tallest building in the world. I wouldn't let my guard down if he'd fallen right into the middle of a bushfire. This is Kyougoku we're talking about, after all. Therefore, I ordered my men to completely cordon off the entire area. No stone was left unturned. After every path and secret passage was sealed off, we slowly began to close in on

the waterfall.”

I’d seen that much for myself, since I’d rushed over as soon as I got the news. There was no way anyone would have been able to break through their encirclement. The Division’s trackers were sent in as well. Even if Kyougoku could fly or burrow into the earth, the Division was experienced enough to handle that. Besides, Kyougoku’s skill had already been confirmed, and it wasn’t something that could physically interfere with the outside world, so there was no way he’d suddenly disappeared from that waterfall. There were no signs of him having any outside help, either.

When I brought this all up with Asukai, he ended up agreeing as well.

“I am very familiar with crimes involving skills due to my line of work, and Kyougoku’s skill wouldn’t have been much help to him under the circumstances. That much, I can say with confidence. His ‘spirit possession’ skill doesn’t work on the physical world.” Asukai glanced at Detective Ayatsuji. “Isn’t that right, Detective?”

The detective nodded with his eyes alone.

“That waterfall is extremely dangerous. Even with some sort of secret backup plan in motion, I still wouldn’t risk falling from that high up on the off chance that it’d work,” Inspector Asukai said as he shoved the tip of his cigarette into a portable ashtray. “The cliff isn’t just a long drop. There are numerous boulders protruding from the cliffside the whole way down. The waterfall basin is impressively deep, too, and the current is far too strong for an amateur to be able to swim to safety. In fact, I tried it out myself just to see and almost drowned.”

“Well... What about a cave or a secret passage hidden behind the waterfall?”

Asukai snickered at my question. “We checked. There was no secret passage. We went on a large-scale mountain hunt in search for a body after that, you know? Even dropped a crash test dummy off the top of the waterfall, and it shattered into pieces.” He looked to the detective and lit another cigarette. “Do you have any idea how he survived and got past us, Detective?”

“Beats me,” was Ayatsuji’s blunt reply.

Kyougoku had done the impossible. He'd survived the fall and escaped from the waterfall basin. There was no telling how he'd been able to pull off such an unbelievable trick.

"Hey, can I say something?" I quietly asked. "To tell the truth, I'm actually not that surprised that Kyougoku vanished at the waterfall."

Asukai looked at me. "Really? Did you figure out how he did it, then?"

"No... Not quite." It would've been really cool if I did, though. "But he's exactly the kind of person who would be able to figure out how to disappear from a waterfall that's surrounded by cops. I mean, compared with all those perfect crimes, vanishing from a waterfall basin seems almost pedestrian. This is the man who's managed to leave behind zero evidence."

Without leaving a trace of evidence, he had twelve people kill one another. He turned the CEO of a large company into a maniac who killed their own employees, and he even somehow managed to release numerous well-known serial killers from jail simultaneously.

They called him many terrifying things: the Sorcerer, the Black Mage, the Puppet Master, et cetera. But to me and the Special Division, he was public enemy number one.

"One thing caught me off guard," I mentioned as I shot the detective a glance. "Kyougoku was hit by Detective Ayatsuji's skill and lived. That alone makes him quite unusual."

Inspector Asukai frowned as if he was deep in thought. Detective Ayatsuji fixed his gaze on me.

The skill that led to accidents claiming the lives of criminals...

An unavoidable fate...

A Special A-Grade Dangerous Skill User...

To borrow Detective Ayatsuji's words, skills were a system. They were eternal truths the world was bound to; there was no escaping the rules they followed. The only way around them would be to trigger a singularity with some other skill—

“Singularity.” I gasped. “Maybe he created a singularity with his skill and canceled out Detective Ayatsuji’s skill? But that’s—”

“A singularity? What’s that?” Asukai curiously tilted his head.

“Huh?” My heart skipped a beat. “Did I say something just now?” I tilted my head to the side as well and smiled.

Skill singularities were among the topics of top secret research at the Special Division.

I thought back to my boss’s explanation:

*“We have reports of multiple skills interacting with one another and, on extremely rare occasions, working in wild, unpredictable ways,” he told me one day. “For example, imagine two people with the skill to always strike first. Let’s say they get in a fight. What happens then? Or if there’s someone with the skill to always trick their opponent, but their opponent has the skill to always see the truth... What then? The answer is you won’t know unless you try it out. Usually, one skill will trump the other, but in extremely rare cases, the two skills end up creating a new phenomenon altogether. The Division calls this a ‘singularity.’”*

I had never seen such a thing with my own two eyes, and I heard that almost no one had ever witnessed such an event, even within the Division. Nevertheless, this was the only way I could imagine someone getting past Detective Ayatsuji’s supposedly unavoidable skill.

Of course, it was hard to imagine a skill that could conflict with Ayatsuji’s “certain death” ability. I heard there was someone at a private detective agency in Yokohama with the uncanny ability to “cancel” other people’s skills. Even that wouldn’t have stopped Kyougoku’s accidental death, though, because Detective Ayatsuji’s skill had already exacted its judgment.

My eyes naturally wandered toward Detective Ayatsuji for a hint, but he was staring silently into the distance, his mind seemingly elsewhere. Our discussion didn’t appear to interest him in the least.

“True, it is odd that Detective Ayatsuji’s skill didn’t kill him,” Asukai said. “I remember being on the scene at the seventeen-victim massacre on Reigo Island five years ago. In the blink of an eye, Detective Ayatsuji killed seventeen

criminals with his skill, each in a different accident. The horrifying things I saw there... They're burned into my eyes forever."

Five years ago, a murder took place on the small island of Reigo when Detective Ayatsuji happened to be there. He ended up solving the case, brutally murdering the seventeen people who'd planned the crime. His skill caused more deaths than the Reigo Island murder itself did, which led the government to mark the detective as a Special A-Grade threat.

As for me...I had close ties to that incident as well.

"The past is in the past," Detective Ayatsuji said as he tapped his pipe. "Either way, Kyougoku's going to make another move soon. What's important right now is how we handle it. Asukai."

"Yes?"

"Remove yourself from this case," Detective Ayatsuji demanded with the most natural of tones. "Let me and the Division handle the rest. This is beyond the purview of an ordinary person like you."

"...An ordinary person?" Asukai raised an eyebrow. "Me...?"

"I'm simply stating facts." The detective shot Asukai a piercing gaze. "You're a talented investigator. You are a law-abiding, morally upright, and persistent man. And that's exactly who he'll target next—someone who is bound by rules and easy to predict. You won't even realize you're being manipulated. Are you confident you could keep your wits about you under his spirit possession?"

"I am." Asukai firmly stared back into Detective Ayatsuji's eyes. "I wouldn't be doing this job if I wasn't."

"Despite knowing that this man has driven nearly a hundred people to their deaths with his skill?"

"Detective Ayatsuji." Asukai took a step forward. "You know why I'm pursuing him. He killed my partner. He tore her limb from limb. That's a fact."

"..."

I didn't know all the details, but Asukai's partner, Yui, was a special top-level agent who died pursuing Kyougoku. We believed Kyougoku was behind it, but

as usual, there wasn't a single piece of evidence to pin on him.

"I must admit, though. I really respect you, Detective Ayatsuji." The muscles in Asukai's chin tensed as he took yet another step forward. "You may be dangerous, but you have a gift. Your skill always kills the criminal. You said I'm a law-abiding man, but you're wrong there. I don't plan on arresting Kyougoku. The moment I find him, I'm going to kill him."

Asukai then inhaled, held his breath, and added:

"And I'm going to do it before you can."

After the detective listened in silence, he took a puff from his pipe, exhaled some smoke, and replied, "Let's see it, then."

That was when a dry, rattling metallic sound echoed down the hallway.

I immediately looked down in search of what was causing it, only to find a cylindrical object made out of some sort of silvery, shiny metal. It was around the size of a can of coffee. One end of the cylinder was spherical, which made it appear almost as if it was some sort of massive bullet. It looked extremely familiar... Where had I seen one of these before?

That was when off-white smoke suddenly began shooting furiously out of the can.

"...Gas grenade!" Asukai shouted like a hawk.

The next instant, flashing lights and thunderous bangs came from the other end of the hallway. It was gunfire. By the time I realized we were being shot at, I'd lost all sense of time, and a bitter cold had begun to crawl up my legs.

"This way! Hurry!"

Inspector Asukai's shouts were drowned out by the bullets flying past my ears. He and Detective Ayatsuji shoved me forward and sprinted as quickly as they could. Everything was going by so fast that all I could see were blurry images: smoke, bullets, the spinning floor and walls. Parts of the ceiling and walls came crumbling down from the gunfire.

Although the distance threw off the enemy's aim, the innate fear of being shot at in a hallway with nowhere to hide had completely shut down the

rational side of my brain. I had no idea what to do. Multiple people were shooting at us with rifles, which echoed hollowly. I wanted to run, but my legs weren't listening to me.

An ambush. Gunfire. I had to run. No—I had to fight back.

“What are you doing, you idiot?!”

Someone tightly grabbed my hand and began to pull me away. It was a low, sonorous voice. But before I could even process who it was, my body began to react on its own, and I shot off, sprinting forward as quickly as possible toward the door in the back. By the time we made it through the iron door, the hallway was almost completely engulfed in white smoke. Right after the door swiftly closed behind us, a bullet bounced off it, creating an ear-piercing ring.

We had escaped into a small room, perhaps some sort of supply closet. A window, maybe big enough for someone to barely fit through, welcomed dull light into the room and illuminated the dust floating in the air. There was nowhere else to go. It was a dead end. Therefore, I decided to reach for the sole window in the room to escape...when Detective Ayatsuji suddenly stopped me.

“Don't,” he demanded, his voice a little gentler than usual. “The place is surrounded.”

He was right. I could hear faint footsteps coming from outside, and it wasn't just one or two people. Heavy, hard boots were getting closer, crunching through the gravel, which meant that all the exits were most likely being heavily guarded.

“What...in the world...?” I managed to say after finally catching my breath.

“That's no gang or mafia,” Asukai noted, keeping his voice down. “I can tell by the sound of their rifles. But then who are they—?”

Suddenly, Asukai grunted in pain. He was holding his side and gritting his teeth.

“Inspector Asukai, your side...,” I started.

“It's not as bad as it looks. The bullet went straight through. Just nicked a rib.”

He claimed it wasn't bad, but the sweat dripping down his forehead told a



different story. Dark-red blood was gushing out of the wound by the rib where he was applying pressure, dyeing his suit crimson.

“More importantly, we’d better get out of here. If they toss a grenade into this tiny room, we’re done for.”

“Hmph. Really couldn’t have chosen a more boring way to try and pen me in. An ambush with guns? How mediocre. We ought to just brush them off.”

Detective Ayatsuji was still staring into space, even during a time like this. It was as if he could see his archnemesis, Kyougoku, standing in the distance and watching him. After the detective closed his eyes and pondered for a few moments, he opened them once more and shifted his gaze toward me.

“I have an idea.”

\*

I crouched ready with my handgun by the door. The grip was slippery with sweat. In fact, I was sweating so much that it was only a matter of time before I risked having some randomly get in my eyes. Even though I was constantly wiping my forehead with my sleeve, it still wasn’t enough.

The gunfire had temporarily ceased, but a second wave of far more thorough and relentless attacks was bound to follow soon. That was why we had to get out of this room and escape before that happened, and the only one who could make that happen was me.

*I’m fine*, I thought. I’d finished at the top of my class at the academy in practical training, and I knocked out far more than a few instructors when they came at me with practice batons. However, there hadn’t been any live rounds during training. I’d known about my opponents’ weapons and abilities, and most importantly, the instructors hadn’t actually been trying to kill me. It hadn’t mattered who was still standing in the end because we both joked with one another immediately afterward.

*But whoever falls here will never get up again. Will I really be able to do it?*

The enemy was most likely using jammers outside, so I wasn’t getting any signal. But if I made it far enough out of range, I could call the Division headquarters. We didn’t need to kill every last bad guy.

“There are probably far fewer enemies out there than we think.”

That was what Detective Ayatsuji said earlier as he drew a simple map on the dust-covered floor while we discussed strategy.

“I know this because they used a smoke grenade to lure us here. There are only two entryways in this room: the door we came through and that small window.”

The detective drew the access points onto the map.

“How do hunters catch their prey when they lack people and firepower? It’s simple. They surprise them into a pitfall trap. After that, it’s like shooting fish in a barrel.”

He drew arrows onto the map. Once the enemy used smoke and gunfire to block off the larger exit—the door we’d come in through—they’d just have to toss tear gas or a grenade through the window, and we’d be done for. It made sense; that would keep the hunters’ damage and expenditures to a minimum.

In other words, the enemy didn’t have enough personnel to fully crush us.

“So...the side with the smoke isn’t as heavily guarded?” Asukai asked, crouched down with his arms around his knees.

“Precisely. The barrier on the other side of this door is more of a mental one than a physical one. The smoke makes it difficult to see anything, and that’s exactly why there are only two men positioned here. I confirmed they were armed while we were running.”

It’d taken everything me and Asukai had to get out of there, and yet the detective had the presence of mind to count the number of rifles...

“Just who are we up against?” Asukai asked Detective Ayatsuji.

“Beats me. But that doesn’t matter, because it’s clear who’s controlling them.”

This was the first wave of Kyougoku’s attack.

“You mean they’re being manipulated by Kyougoku’s skill?”

“Not quite. His skill, Possession Drop, lets a spirit down onto its target,

altering their mind. However, only the target can see this spirit, and for the most part, it indirectly instills anger and confusion in them. He can't engineer organized combat ops like this. To him, his skill is merely supplementary. What makes him truly evil is his own demonic intellect."

His comment reminded me of a file I read at the Division. Kyougoku's skill apparently ranked far below Detective Ayatsuji's. It was neither a physical attack nor did it allow him to have complete control over his target. The spirits and creatures that possessed the targets would only make them hallucinate by showing them an illusion. That was all it did. But then...how did he manage to organize this attack?

I thought back to what the detective had told us while tightening my hand around the grip of my gun outside its holster.

"Asukai will fire a warning shot out the window when he sees a chance. That'll be our signal to go," Detective Ayatsuji instructed, leaning against the wall. "The worst that'll happen is we'll all die, but I'm hoping you manage to pull this off, Tsujimura."

"...All right."

"No need to ask the enemy who was behind this. If you sense danger, kill them at once."

"All right..."

Kill... I got that. There was no other choice. Any other option had gone out the window the moment they started shooting at us. I was in no position to hesitate. But I'd never killed anyone in actual combat before.

"Tsujimura, what was the one line from that film you like so much?"

I was briefly taken aback by the sudden question, but the words almost immediately came to mind.

*"Your biggest mistake was being born in the same era as me."*

"Detective Ayatsuji," I grumbled, glaring at him. "You're a real jerk. You know that?"

But I was finally able to relax thanks to him. The protagonist in that movie

wouldn't be afraid during times like this, so I wasn't going to be afraid, either.

"Heading out."

After Inspector Asukai and I exchanged glances, I reached for the door, flipped the safety off my gun, and the moment I heard the bullet go out the window, I sprinted out the room.

The corridor was nothing but white smoke. I couldn't even see a few feet in front of me, but that would actually work in my favor. I started sprinting; I didn't even make a sound, since I'd taken my shoes off earlier. Detective Ayatsuji was right. The enemy couldn't see through all this smoke, either, so if I approached quietly while barefoot, I'd have the element of surprise. Lowering my stance as I ran, I kept my pistol pointing forward to make sure I could fire at any time. I had to end things before the smoke cleared.

Before long, I could see the tips of someone's black boots where the smoke wasn't as thick. We were essentially as close as you could get, which gave neither of us any time to prepare. I noticed the startled enemy lift up his rifle out of the corner of my eye, so I slid between his legs, turned around, and swept him. He was still trying to aim the gun at me as he fell, so I kicked the gun into the air, then swung my leg back down, stepping on his wrist.

I pointed my gun at him, which was the first time I actually got a good look at the man. He was wearing bulletproof body armor and a gas mask with a small camera over his right eye, and his gun was equipped with a red-dot sight. A bad feeling began to swell in the pit of my stomach.

I held the gun to his head and shouted, "State your affiliation and mission objective!"

But he didn't respond, so I fired a warning shot into the floor and shouted once more:

"Affiliation and mission objective!"

"City police...counterterrorist task force..., " came a muffled voice behind the gas mask. "We got a tip that a murderer killed a detective and took his place... He was barricaded in here with hostages... We were storming in."

What on earth? We weren't fighting bad guys. We were fighting the police's

special task force. I felt like I could hear Kyougoku's high-pitched cackling even now.

"Shit!" I shouted with my gun still in position. "Nobody is impersonating a detective. We're with the government! You were given false information—"

But I wasn't even able to finish my sentence, because the other member of the task force tried to knock me out from the side. A gunstock brushed against the tip of my nose while I twisted out of the way. As my palms touched the ground, I flipped myself back onto my feet. Immediately, the enemy threw a punch. These highly trained, fully equipped soldiers could break bone with a single blow. Therefore, I leaned as far as I could to my right, dodging the strike before grabbing his extended elbow and dragging him toward me. I planned to go for his throat, since it was the only weak point in his armor. I did just that, throwing an elbow into his unprotected neck and causing him to moan in agony. I then pistol-whipped his temple with the butt of my gun.

All of a sudden, I lost my balance...because the man I had knocked down earlier had grabbed my ankle. Perhaps he was simply trying to stop us from fighting, but his timing couldn't have been worse. Right as I began to fall back, I saw a muzzle in front of my face. The man I had hit on the temple was now pointing his rifle at me, so I held out my pistol to fire as well. The only way I was going to stop him was if I shot him in his bulletproof vest, but I was in no position to choose where I wanted to shoot. I felt like I was watching a movie frame by frame; time had almost come to a halt.

But I continued to fall, and my vision spun. The enemy's gun was pointing right at me, and I instinctively put my finger on the trigger and aimed my pistol at his face. By the time my back hit the floor, our muzzles were facing each other.

However, out of nowhere, *a black monster seeped out from under my feet.*

It was like a shadow come to life; it had horns on its head and a black scythe in hand, which it swung into the man's chest. Fresh blood squirted out from his sternum until he eventually collapsed. The dark, horned creature then let out an ear-piercing screech before slipping back inside my shadow and melting into nothingness.

I couldn't believe what was happening.

Why did my skill have to show up now of all times?

## INTERLUDE

### The Lower Realms *Darkness* The Witching Hour

A crested ibis cawed.

It was an empty abyss, void of all light. Kyougoku awoke in a space outside space in a time outside time. He was awake in a slumber and conscious while unconscious as bubble-like thoughts eventually formed his silhouette.

A crested ibis cawed, followed by the roar of a beast.

Kyougoku stirred. No, he did not even move.

His actions were not actions, for nothing existed in this world. He pondered while well aware that he was not able to think. A thought without a brain. Self-contemplation without thought. *I think, and yet I am not*—Kyougoku bitterly smirked at the contradictions and fallacies while he sat up.

This place was akin to a womb. Dark, noisy, and the line between one second and the next blurred. The boundary between what was inside his body and outside was ambiguous as well.

Then again, perhaps the darkness was his own thoughts.

The skill user Kyougoku was once a man of many personas. To some, he was an eccentric old geezer who lived in a shack in the countryside. To others, he was a well-read, kind-natured elderly gentleman. At times, he was a climate researcher. He'd even been briefly hired by the government to solve puzzles or riddles.

However, there was one persona Kyougoku loved most of all.

The Sorcerer.

A cunning, wicked man who played with the lives of others and made a mockery of their entire being as he utilized his skill and conspiracies to toy with

the world.

He was called evil and targeted by government organizations, which proved to be somewhat troublesome due to their sheer scale. However, it was society's job to squash any villain who overstayed their stay. Just like how the human body's immune system would remove foreign objects, man would try to remove evil from society as well. Therefore, it would be far simpler to live quietly while being called an eccentric, mysterious man than be called evil for murdering someone. There wouldn't be much of a price to pay, either.

Nevertheless, Kyougoku was unable to do that, and he chose to become this evil.

*Do no evil*, Kyougoku thought. Obviously, it was not something to strive for. But why? Because it meant punishment? Or because people would despise you? Or perhaps because you would be condemned in a court of law?

...No—it was the other way around. Evil was wrong; therefore, evil must be punished.

But why was it wrong?

Kyougoku knew the answer to that as well: because evil was the quickest way to profit. In other words, it was robbing someone else for one's own benefit.

Theft, using one's position to accept a bribe, killing people who got in the way—the essence of evil was not creating something oneself but stealing that something from others.

For example, what would happen if you gathered a hundred people who believed that stealing was the quickest way to get something, then had them build a village? The answer was simple. The village would be in ruins within a couple of weeks.

Nobody would plow any fields. Nobody would build any houses. In a village where everyone was simply trying to steal the work of others for personal gain, there would be neither progress nor development. Violence would rule all until the chaos spread throughout the entire community, creating a hell on earth.

That was why evil was the bane of society. Society did not prohibit murder because of fear or disgust. Society prohibited murder because the price to pay



to protect a system where murder was normalized would be far too much, and the system itself would come crumbling down.

In essence, both punishment and ethics were logical mechanisms for reducing continuous costs. Thus, evil was selfishness. It was prioritizing oneself over others, and that was why it must be eliminated from society. It was why there had to be a threat of punishment for selfishness, and yet being selfish was instinctual for mankind as well.

People would do anything to protect themselves and the ones they loved, even if they were up against the entire world and many people would die. That was what it meant to be human.

Therefore, removing evil was no different from removing what made humankind human, was it not?

Kyougoku shifted around and softly coughed.

*Upon reflection, I must wonder—am I evil?*

He pondered. Was he selfish? Did he prioritize himself over others?

No. He had never done such a thing. Kyougoku always made himself second or even third priority. Although he instinctively did the bare minimum necessary for self-preservation, nothing he had done was ever to rob others of what they had earned for themselves. While some may have considered Kyougoku a psychopath who enjoyed having control over others for his own amusement, their assumption was incorrect. His actions were always altruistic.

In fact, he had never killed for his own benefit.

The deaths that followed Kyougoku were always the result of someone else killing others. Although evil was in his shadow, Kyougoku himself always maintained his integrity even within the eye of the storm. The only time he became selfish was when he was threatened.

Kyougoku thought back to his first and most selfish act. He had been in utero.

He could still vividly remember the darkness and the warmth, the snugness and the softness. Kyougoku's mind was already outside the realms of what was normal then.

He was trapped in a narrow room. Inside the womb, there was no exit, no light, and no clue as to where he was. His mother's heartbeat was strangely loud and unruly. *Fear* was the only word for it, for he was trapped in some mysterious, dark place. He cried and fought, but his body was far too small to have any effect. There was no air, so he couldn't even scream. Kyougoku was trapped.

When he was eventually born upon this world, there was still no salvation.

His delivery was met with an unbearable pain that he could never forget. His body twisted in unbelievable directions while he was pushed through the terribly small gate. The world he was eventually introduced to was overwhelmingly bright and a flood of information. The shock simply brought him to tears. Only when he was finally free did he realize just how wonderful his small, cozy cradle of darkness had been.

However, he immediately knew he would never return. He had no choice but to live in this cold world.

His eyes were still closed, but he could tell there were *things* around him; he sensed them through the light. They were titans wrapped in fabric, looking down at him. The situation was far from normal, yet Kyougoku's mind remained calm, and he understood that these giants were the same species as him. He knew that he had to survive in this flood of light somehow, now that he was born.

The titans were large and seemingly powerful, so he was instantly able to recognize that he would have no chance of beating them. Therefore, he decided that he had to protect himself by any means from these shockingly violent and threatening ogres.

That was Kyougoku's first and greatest moment of selfishness.

Not too much longer after that, he learned just how fragile these giants were, how pathetically fearful they were of the threat of violence. Above these titans—these humans—there existed a superstructure.

There were invisible rulers that controlled these weak creatures. Put simply, these were systems: society, populations, organizations, families, companies, local governments, and even entire nations. All these controlled the flesh that

was the individual, contained them, and even crushed them. Every individual born into this world was a slave to the system and contributed to it as well. Being altruistic was forced, and being selfish—functioning how humans were supposed to function—was betraying the system, and those who betrayed the system were removed, punished, and at times, given the death penalty. In other words, they were eliminated.

This was a clear contradiction—one Kyougoku believed *he could use*.

What was good? What was evil? He mused on the concepts over and over again...until he reached a single conclusion.

Kyougoku sat up, a filthy smirk on his face.

“I suppose it’s time to start the game...”

He raised his deeply wrinkled fingers and grabbed the pawn, setting the next ceremony into motion.

## CHAPTER 4

### Ministry of Justice *Morning Sunny*

No matter how you sliced it, there was no way this wouldn't be the worst day of my life.

I drove my Aston Martin to the Ministry of Justice headquarters, rubbing my puffy eyes along the way. The morning sun gave me a stabbing headache.

I'd barely gotten any sleep last night. My body felt heavy as if it was covered in mud; some of that must've been delayed muscle soreness. I'd clearly pushed myself too hard breaking through that enemy siege.

Fighting. Gunfire. Hand-to-hand combat. My skill.

I sighed.

"You're late, Tsujimura. Enjoy sleeping in this morning?"

I looked up to find Detective Ayatsuji standing in front of the entrance. The leader of the sniper unit must have brought him here today.

"There was nothing enjoyable about my morning. I couldn't even sleep last night."

"I can tell. You look awful. And I'm going to make sure you look even worse the next time you're late to our meeting."

I only had the energy to glare back at him with my head still hung low.

"Come on, let's go. You know how childish these big-baby bureaucrats can get when you leave them waiting."

The detective and I walked side by side into the Ministry of Justice headquarters. It was new with cream-colored sparkling floors, clearly displaying the reflections of all who walked over it. The ceiling seemed almost endlessly high, and the lobby was so big that you could probably play an entire game of

baseball in it. The people coming and going were distinguished, wearing crisp suits that seemed brand-new. I bet looking good in a suit while wandering through the lobby was in their job description.

I, on the other hand, was nothing like them. I'd been called here to take responsibility for my actions.

In the fighting the previous day—when we were under siege by the city's counterterrorist task force—I ended up severely injuring one of their men...with my skill. I'd punctured his lungs, and he still hadn't regained consciousness. He was hovering between life and death.

And that's why I was summoned here.

The shoot-out was inevitable. My fighting could pass as self-defense. Unfortunately, the rules were different for a member of the Special Division for Unusual Powers, especially one who'd used her skill to maim a police officer—someone with governmental authority. Because now politics were involved.

The Division had the privilege of handling something as confidential as skills, and that privilege extended to us agents, who were given special rights to use our own skills. Furthermore, we were a secret organization unknown to the public. What if the Division rampaged out of control? What if we suddenly turned on the government? That was precisely what so many high-up bureaucrats feared, and they were constantly pressuring the government to revoke our privileges.

There were people like that in the Ministry of Justice as well. Hence, we were in their building.

"So when are we meeting them?" Detective Ayatsuji asked.

"In a moment," I replied, looking down at my watch. I stood in a corner of the lobby to wait. "Ughhh, I can't believe this is happening... I was just trying to do my best," I muttered almost instinctively, despite the fact that I was actually planning on waiting in silence.

"Indeed," the detective replied, still facing forward. "Kyougoku set us up and pitted us against the city's counterterrorist task force—and now a man who's supposed to protect and serve the people of the city is in critical condition. This

tragedy happened thanks to our lack of critical thinking and your inexperience with your skill. Having said that, you're not the one to blame given how seriously you took everything. They're being unreasonable."

"Detective." I glared at him. "Don't you think you could have phrased that a little better?"

"How so? 'Don't worry about it, rookie. You're still new. Just be more careful next time'?" I could tell from his expression that he wasn't holding back. "Maybe that'd work if you had a desk job with the police, but there is no 'next time' when it comes to human life."

I was speechless. The detective was absolutely right.

Nearly all Special Division agents were skill users themselves. You'd have to look really hard to find an organization with this many, even within the government. I was a Special Division agent, and I had an incredibly unique skill. Now, if you asked me whether my skill was valuable or powerful—well, that was another story. Especially since mine *didn't listen to my orders*.

My skill lurked in my shadow by my feet. It didn't really take a distinct shape; instead, it was like this vague, skill-derived life-form was making my shadow move on its own. Basically, all I knew was that it had horns like a goat, walked on two legs, and attacked with what looked like a black scythe. The rest was up in the air. Even straining my eyes didn't help me see it any more clearly. I had no idea what it was thinking, either.

I called it my Shadow Child.

That very moment, it was hidden in my shadow, thinking about something. I didn't know when it would appear or who it would attack; I didn't even know whose side it was on. Sometimes, I'd be walking, and I'd sense it watching me, which sent chills down my spine.

A monster lurked inside me. This bizarre *thing* lingered among the shadows of my life.

"Detective," I said hoarsely. "Have you ever wished you didn't have your skill?"

"Well, that's a rather mature question. I don't mind answering, but I doubt

someone as immature as you would be able to handle it. You'd need to stress over a question like that for another ten or so years. How long ago did your skill awaken?"

I didn't even have to count on my fingers because I already knew exactly how long it had been.

"...Five years."

"Very little is known about how and why skills are acquired, but there is usually some trigger. In your case, it was *your mother's death* five years ago at Reigo Island. Gaining a skill or two after a tragedy like that isn't surprising, regardless of whether the person gaining the skill wants it or not."

In the Reigo Island Massacre five years ago, tourists visiting the island started to suspiciously disappear one by one.

Ever since my mother died during the incident, I'd had to deal with this strange, unstable skill. My mentor at the Division described it as my mother's "memento." Regardless, it was thanks to Mom that I manifested this skill and got scouted by the Division. So in a sense, I have her to thank for being an agent. My mentor told me to "call it a gift from your mother."

However, I could still vividly remember the black, cold Shadow Child piercing that special task force member's chest. There was no hostility—only a pure, obvious desire to kill.

This...was a *gift*?

My mom hadn't been fit for motherhood. I bet I wasn't fit for daughterhood, either.

She'd barely spoken to me for the last few years before her death. My mother felt like a complete stranger, and I just knew she saw me as some creepy girl. I doubt she even liked me much.

Was my Shadow Child really proof that she cared about me?

"Detective, you're the one who solved the 'Reigo Island' case, right? What was my mother like?"

"Good question. I don't really remember things that fail to interest me."

My shoulders fell. "...Oh."

"I'm lying. I remember every last detail, but none of it is the sort of information you want."

He raised his gaze as if he was thinking back to the past.

"By the way, do you know the details about that incident?" Detective Ayatsuji asked. "Those murders were the collective efforts of the entire island. They killed tourists in secret and made it look like the victims were taking an extended stay on the island, continuously drawing money from their accounts. There would have been far more victims if I hadn't solved the case, but that doesn't mean that I found everyone responsible for those murders."

When I glanced in his direction, his expression still hadn't changed.

"There were seventeen islanders involved, but the eighteenth one—the leader—is still at large. He's a very careful, cunning man. All I know is he was the one who encouraged the other seventeen to commit the murders. Also, eyewitnesses said he was missing the tip of his left ring finger. We don't know his real name or what he looks like. The police call him the Engineer because of his job on the island."

The eighteenth murderer... He was the only one absent when Detective Ayatsuji got to the island; that's why the detective's skill didn't kill him despite the fact that he'd been the most involved in the murders.

Regardless, the detective solved the case, and when he had all seventeen criminals die in "accidents" via his skill, their gruesome fates attracted the government's attention.

The detective and I were deeply connected to both the Reigo Island Massacre and the Engineer.

Detective Ayatsuji shot me a sidelong glance. "Did you join the Division and get assigned to me...so you could seek revenge for what happened?"

I didn't respond.

Revenge.

Of course a young girl would want to avenge her murdered mother.



Me, on the other hand... I wasn't sure. Did I want revenge? Was that why I'd taken this job? I'd asked myself that too many times to count, but I still didn't have an answer.

"At any rate, it all comes back to Kyougoku," Detective Ayatsuji told me. "He's well-informed of the criminal network here. We might find a clue as to the Engineer's whereabouts. But first, we need to deal with the issue in front of us." He looked ahead. "Here he is. The messenger from hell, here to ferry you to the underworld."

When I lifted my head back up, I noticed someone approaching.

"Oh! If it isn't Detective Yukito Ayatsuji! I have heard so much about you! What an honor it is to finally meet you!"

It was a man wearing a dark-gray Brioni suit. Everything about him was well trimmed and neat, from his nails to his goatee. His cheeks were dimpled, and there wasn't even a single spiteful wrinkle you'd normally expect most middle-aged bureaucrats to have. His appearance, polished to perfection, sent one distinct message. Bureaucracy was big on looks, attitude, and voice—all exterior, no interior.

Deputy Director Sakashita of the Ministry of Justice's Judicial Affairs Bureau, one of the snakes infesting the central government. Standing by his side in a black suit was his run-of-the-mill private secretary, who was quietly holding some files.

"Everyone in the know around here has been going on and on about how you're one of the most dangerous skill users in the entire country...but just between you and me, I have nothing but respect for your abilities. Your powers of investigation and observation and, most of all, your skill that ruthlessly eliminates the most despicable of criminals. I would love to discuss a few of these brutal cases of yours sometime."

With a radiant smile, the deputy director firmly shook Detective Ayatsuji's hand as if he were sending some sort of invisible energy into his body. Not once had he even glanced in my direction.

"Deputy Director Sakashita, thank you for coming all this way," the detective began without even batting an eye. "Did you read the case report?"

“No, I only heard a brief summary.” Sakashita’s smile was as brilliant as the sun. “I wanted to hear the details directly from you if possible. Come, let’s chat over a cup of tea.”

“Wait,” I cut in. “I’m responsible for what happened, not Detective Ayatsuji or the Special Division. The report says as much.”

“Hmph.” The deputy director raised an eyebrow at me as if he had just noticed my existence. “It’s not up to you to decide that, young lady. It’s what the folks at the top of the food chain get to decide. They’re the ones who make the rules.”

“The rules?”

“Hmm... All right. How about I tell you the truth? Maybe that would make you feel better.” He spread out his arms wide and grinned. “What happened wasn’t your fault. The problem lies with the rules—the organizational structure. The Special Division is a cancer upon this nation. They hide skill users and their crimes, and they try to make everyone believe that skills have absolutely no effect upon the world. Then they abuse their privileged position and keep anyone else from monitoring skill users. It’s a vast, evil conspiracy, the kind you see in the movies.”

“What?!” I instinctively cried.

“You don’t agree? Well, the average citizen would feel differently if they knew the truth. Just like how a doctor removes cancerous tissue, it’s my job to remove the Division from its privileged position. And thanks to you, I can now do just that.”

Sakashita faintly smirked like an executioner smiling one last time at his prisoner. The Ministry of Home Affairs’ Special Division and the Ministry of Justice’s judicial branch got along like cats and dogs, like oil and water, like the north wind and the sun. As adversaries, they had been at odds with each other and gone back and forth in a power struggle over the years.

The Ministry of Justice, which presided over the judicial system, the police, and governmental prosecution, sought impartial justice for all people, regardless if someone was a skill user or an ordinary citizen.

But the Special Division for Unusual Powers felt differently. They claimed that the individual variation between skills was far too great, to the point that each skill had to be handled differently if abused. Some people could control their targets without even touching them. Others could read minds. There were even some skill users who could move at the speed of light. In other words, they were all so different from one another that a blanket rule for dealing with them would do no good.

To the Ministry of Justice, the Special Division was a pain in the ass trying to tell them how to uphold the law and do their job.

Sure...the Special Division wasn't perfect. They were willing to manage skill users by any means necessary. There were even rumors that they'd given a criminal organization in Yokohama permission to practice business utilizing their skills and even endorsed them, although with limitations. On top of that, there was a decent number of people who sarcastically called the Division the Watchers, since they would only monitor and not go after these criminals. We weren't these defenders of justice who never got our hands dirty. That much I understood.

"But the Special Division for Unusual Powers is indispensable," I argued. "Regular police forces can't even understand skill-based crimes, much less crack down on them. That's exactly why we exist. Please, I have to ask you to—"

"I'm afraid I have no interest in your opinion," the deputy director snapped, cutting me off. "We called you here to be the tool that I need to crush the Special Division with. I'll bring this up at the next council meeting, If you don't mind, Detective Ayatsuji, I will need to borrow your assistant at that time."

The detective simply shrugged without saying a word. Sakashita started walking ahead, flashing a smile made for television.

"There's nothing more to discuss," he said. "We're going to start gathering evidence and put an end to this once and for all."

But right before he left the lobby, he looked back one more time and faintly smirked.

"My heart goes out to that police officer on death's door, but he really chose the perfect time to get stabbed."

The deputy director and his secretary began to head toward the elevator in the back.

“Hey!”

“Hold it,” Detective Ayatsuji demanded, sticking out his arm to stop me from running off.

“But if we don’t do something, he’s going to—!”

“What are you, some sort of middle school yokel? Don’t let his little taunts irk you.” He shot me an icy glare. “Good grief... You know what? Today’s your lucky day. I’m going to teach you how to deal with scum like him. Watch carefully.” Detective Ayatsuji looked over to the deputy director. “Deputy Director Sakashita.”

The deputy director turned around.

“I forgot one thing. I’d like to hear about the officer who was stabbed in the right breast.”

“The right?” Sakashita furrowed his brow. “Wasn’t he stabbed in the left side?”

“Exactly. It was his left breast. That proves you were lying when you said you only heard an outline of the report,” Detective Ayatsuji frankly replied. “It’s no surprise, really. A bureaucrat as crafty as you wouldn’t ignore a report that could spell your foe’s downfall.”

Sakashita frowned slightly. It must have been true, then.

Detective Ayatsuji, on the other hand, was unfazed. “The report included another crucial detail: the instigator who gave the police a fake breakin order.”

“...I believe it was that skill user, Kyougoku, who was thought to be dead?”

“But he’s alive, and he has a mind-altering spirit-control skill. He also gets a sick kind of joy out of harassing me and my assistant.”

“And? What are you trying to say?”

“It’s simple. I thought about what insidious thing someone who sicced a special task force on us would do next. For example: He might be secretly

controlling central government officials in order to dissolve Tsujimura's employer. Does that ring any bells?"

"What?" Sakashita's face immediately changed colors. "Are you claiming that I'm being controlled? Preposterous. I have neither the reason nor the motive to do as that man says."

"I told you that he can control minds. And if you're really Kyougoku's puppet, then we'll need to detain you before you commit any crimes."

"Detain me? I... I'm not being manipulated by any skill." The deputy director's expression stiffened.

"That's what they all say. I can't trust an amateur's self-diagnosis, though."

"This is absurd!"

"But I wonder... Oh, I do happen to know of a group that specialize in skills. One quick checkup, and they can prove your innocence. They're called the Special Division for Unusual Powers. Ever heard of it?" Detective Ayatsuji faintly smirked. Deputy Director Sakashita's face, meanwhile, gradually turned pale. "The Division has an expert in recovering memories. Let's have him take a look at you."

"Memories...?" Sakashita's face couldn't have been any paler. "You can't be serious about this, Detective Ayatsuji! If you do that, then I—"

"Would be in big trouble?" the detective teased.

But Sakashita didn't reply.

"Yes, of course, you would be in trouble if someone saw through the countless, venomous lies you've been spewing." Detective Ayatsuji glared at the man as if he were an insect. "But even I can see the truth here. You lied about more than just the report. 'What an honor it is to finally meet you'? Remind me: Who's the one who called me a cold-blooded reaper behind closed doors again?"

The deputy director's expression froze. He seemed to have no idea how Detective Ayatsuji could even know such a thing.

"It's nothing to be surprised about. It's only natural that a detective would

look into his client. You used a third party to get me to do your dirty work. You never approached me directly. Were you afraid of getting involved in skill-based affairs?”

“He used you?” I chimed in, taken aback.

“Yep. This snake in an expensive suit climbed his way to the top of the Ministry of Justice after his political opponents died or were caught in scandals. His former boss, the minister of justice, died in an accident after a twenty-five-year-old voluntary manslaughter case was exposed. The rival for his current position lost his job when his wife’s crimes came to light. All cases the government hired me to solve, and solve them, I did.”

“Wait just a second,” I pleaded. “So Deputy Director Sakashita...used you to make those who got in his way die in accidents...?”

“I have done no such thing!” Sakashita hollered, impressively flustered. “Even if I did, they were all criminals!”

“Who’s to say you didn’t set them up?” the detective asked.

“There’s no way you can prove that!”

“Indeed. But what was it you said a moment ago? I believe it was ‘the average citizen would feel differently if they knew the truth.’”

“No, I— That was justified! That is— I was telling the truth! Why would you —? Wait...!” Deputy Director Sakashita took a step back in a panic.

“Quit throwing a tantrum. You’re a big-shot bureaucrat, are you not? Regardless, I’ve said my piece. Anyone who secretly hires a skill user to dispose of his rivals will surely be able to create an incredible new system once he gets rid of the Division. You’ll have to show me sometime. But don’t come to me for help when they find the skeletons in your closet.”

The deputy director’s face went back and forth between turning pale and red, but he couldn’t argue.

I was at a loss for words. All Detective Ayatsuji had done was cite real-life examples and Sakashita himself, and yet he somehow managed to turn the deputy director’s own anti-Division rant against him. The detective’s deductive

powers weren't the only thing exceptional about him. He carefully observed other people and promptly came up with the right words to shut them down. He was incredibly quick on his feet.

Then again, Detective Ayatsuji probably just liked bullying people. He did look strangely excited to put Sakashita in his place.

"E-either way, I'll still be questioning your little assistant at the next council meeting. Now if you'll excuse me!"

The deputy director strode toward the back of the lobby, pushing through the people passing by. I still made sure to stick my tongue out at him one last time.

"I feel so much better now, Detective Ayatsuji!" I said, beaming.

"Hmph. It must be wonderful having nothing but sunshine and rainbows filling your head." He coldly stared down at me. "Nothing has changed. Now Sakashita will just switch to attacking you directly. He'll frame you and put the Division's leadership into question. Then all the misconduct I hinted at will get swept under the rug."

"Huh?" My brain suddenly froze. "Then I..."

"Allow me to phrase this in a way that a young girl like you can understand," the detective lamented like a poet. "You might get canned."

"That's not good!"

"Correct." The detective started to tap his head. "That probably isn't good at all."

*Unbelievable!*

I shoved Detective Ayatsuji out of the way and stormed off after the deputy director. I had to do something.

"You should hurry," the detective advised in the background. "Let him get away now, and you'll never have another chance to stop him."

He was right. There was no telling what Sakashita was going to do, but if I didn't act, I was going to find a pink slip in my mailbox within the coming days.

It wasn't like I'd thought things through. I hadn't seen past the deputy

director's silver tongue and found something I could use against him, either. But I couldn't simply back down. I had to prove that as a top-class agent.

I saw Sakashita up ahead walking straight for the elevator in the very back; I vaguely remembered that this one went to the top floor. Only a select few government officials had permission to go there, meaning I had to stop him before he got on.

"Deputy Director Sakashita!" I shouted, but he didn't even turn around; he continued to stroll toward the elevator. I was just going to have to be more forceful. "Deputy Director! We need to talk!"

His secretary had already pressed the call button. Perfect timing. The doors to the elevator quietly opened almost the instant the deputy director arrived.

"Wait!"

I picked up the pace. I had to make some sort of plea, or I would have no future.

Sakashita took a key card out of his pocket, then held it over the authentication panel. It must have been some sort of pass to the top floor.

The deputy director glanced at me blankly, and then his secretary took a step by his side and pressed the CLOSE DOOR button. We were only sixteen feet apart now, which was close enough to catch him if I sprinted.

The elevator began to close...when I suddenly heard a shout from behind.

"Tsujimura, it's a trap! Drag the deputy director out of there!"

I didn't even need to turn around to know that it was Detective Ayatsuji's voice.

Every strand of hair on my head stood on end.

That same moment, I took off running. The elevator doors were already halfway closed when I saw the deputy director's eyes open wide in utter astonishment.

All of a sudden, a roar echoed from within the elevator. It was extremely loud and unpleasant, like a colossal tree collapsing or iron being shredded. But there was no time to check what the sound was. I simply had to trust Detective



Ayatsuji.

*Am I gonna make it in time?*

I reached the elevator within three steps, grabbed Sakashita by the lapel, and pulled him with all my might as the inside of the elevator was swallowed into darkness. The subsequent ear-piercing metallic screech made me disoriented. I just kept pulling as hard as I possibly could.

“Whoaaaaaaa!”

Sakashita crashed into me, and the two of us fell over backward. I hit the back of my head and immediately blacked out.

“Tsujimura!”

That voice was the only thing I could hear. After that, I heard approaching footsteps, followed by an explosion.

“Tsujimura, get up,” came a voice right above me.

I cracked open my eyes and could sort of see Detective Ayatsuji’s face, although I couldn’t make out his expression.

“What...happened...?” I asked him.

“The elevator collapsed.”

A chill ran down my spine. I shifted my eyes toward the elevator. On the other side of the half-open door was just a dark elevator shaft. Black metal powder was scattered across the floor in front of the elevator.

“Is Deputy Director...Sakashita...okay...?”

“Yeah, you saved him,” the detective quietly replied. *“Half of him, at least.”*

It wasn’t until that moment that I finally checked to see what I was holding on to.

There was the deputy director, facedown...in his gray suit...with his spinal cord and intestines hanging out.

His lower body was missing. There was a fresh trail of blood from the elevator door to his upper half.

Detective Ayatsuji approached the elevator and peered into the dark shaft as if he were staring inside the body of some sort of long creature.

“The serpent,” the detective mused. ““The next victim will be devoured by the *mizuchi*...’ So there’s our serpent, huh?”

The crowd in the lobby began to stir. The elevator had collapsed, leaving a mangled dead body and blood and flesh.

It was only a matter of time before the chaos started to spread until the entire lobby was in a frenzy...

\*

The desk phone rang right when Asukai removed his leather gloves and started to take a bite of a new kind of pickled vegetable.

Thanks to his years of experience, he could tell what kind of call was coming just by hearing the phone ring. The way it rang when a bully beat up a kid, when a group of filthy men was seen gathered in a back alley, when his new coffee dripper had arrived—the sound was different for each one. His coworkers laughed at him about it, but none of that mattered once you were a special high-level inspector for the military police. Although sometimes, this kind of intuition changed the path of a case.

Asukai swiftly turned to the phone on his desk. He was all too familiar with the urgency of this ringing.

This was a *murder*.

The moment he answered, he discovered his gut instinct was right. After confirming the details, he hung up, grabbed his coat, and rushed out of the office all while ordering three of his subordinates to come with him.

Once outside, he checked to make sure his gun was loaded. It was a government-issued 9mm, with a magazine capacity of nine rounds. There was one round in the chamber.

Although fully loaded, he hoped he would never have to even remove the safety.

After putting his leather gloves back on, he stepped into his car with his subordinates and began to head to the scene of the crime.

The murder had occurred at the Ministry of Justice's underground elevator pit. The city police and security had already sealed off the area and were awaiting Asukai's arrival.

After parking in the underground lot, Asukai started walking toward the building when he noticed two familiar faces turn in his direction.

"Oh, Asukai. I figured you'd come."

"Detective Ayatsuji. Hey." Asukai bowed; he'd already been told that these two would be here. "Looks like you've had a rough time."

"Me? The deputy director's the one who had a rough time, having to bid farewell to his lower half."

Asukai followed the detective's gaze to an elevator with its doors removed, exposing the inside. He didn't even have to take a peek to know what had happened; the stench he had grown so accustomed to was more than enough. It reeked of blood.

The walls inside the elevator were warped, and iron powder was scattered about. Splattered on the floor was a pool of human blood, around half of which was most likely from the victim's lower body. His bespectacled secretary's corpse was there as well; the young man's spine had snapped upon impact when the elevator plunged to the bottom.

"Deputy Director Sakashita's a big name around here," Asukai stated, frowning at the dreadful sight. "We'll need a media strategy before this gets out of control."

The victims were Deputy Director Sakashita of the Ministry of Justice and his secretary. According to the report from the Ministry of Justice's security, the elevator they were both in suddenly dropped. There had been a few dozen eyewitnesses in the lobby as well.

Inspector Asukai slowly surveyed the scene of the crime and said, "The elevator should have an emergency brake mechanism, but—"

"That was destroyed, too," Ayatsuji interrupted. "The deputy director's death must have been premeditated."

“Really?” Asukai raised an eyebrow. “So someone who was watching Sakashita remotely destroyed the emergency brakes and cut the cables after he got on the elevator...”

And if that was true, then the murderer had to have been in a place where they could see this elevator—the first-floor lobby. Therefore, every single person in that lobby needed to be questioned and have their belongings inspected.

But right as Asukai reached that conclusion, Ayatsuji suddenly muttered, “That’s not what happened.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. Look at that.”

Ayatsuji pointed at the authentication panel inside the elevator. It required scanning a key card.

“This panel gives access to the office space on the top floor, and the elevator will take you there if you scan your ID card on the panel. But if you look closely, there’s another thinner dummy panel stuck on top of it that sends a special wired signal only when a certain individual scans his ID.”

When Asukai leaned in closer, he realized that there was, in fact, another perfectly sized magnetic display around one millimeter thick on top of the original cream-colored scanner. It had the exact same design as the original. Only a specialist would have ever noticed.

The dummy panel was halfway torn off, exposing the thin-film circuit on the back. It had wires that extended all the way to the outside of the elevator. These must have been connected to some sort of detonator.

“Let me get this straight,” Asukai began. “This dummy panel was set to detect Deputy Director Sakashita’s card and drop the elevator when he was inside, sending him falling to his death?”

Ayatsuji nodded. “The culprit’s a careful one. There was no smell of explosives in the lobby. They also used a bomb that left no residue so that nobody could trace its origins. Furthermore, the electric cord and the panel itself were all built from standard retail parts you can find at any hardware store, so it’ll be nearly

impossible to track the killer via physical evidence alone. To make matters worse, the bomb wasn't remotely controlled, either, so analyzing radio frequencies won't do us any good. This was really well-thought-out."

Asukai rapidly began to calculate his next steps. The criminal made extra sure they couldn't be traced, but this wasn't a scheme that any punk on the street could come up with. The culprit needed specialized knowledge, which should naturally narrow down the list of suspects.

Asukai decided to check if his suspicions were correct. "But this must've taken some specialized knowledge to create, right? Could that help us find our culprit?"

Ayatsuji shook his head. "Maybe if this were a normal case. But this didn't require any specialized knowledge. Anyone could have done it."

Asukai curiously tilted his head to the side. "What makes you say that?"

"Because *Kyougoku* was behind this," the detective replied, narrowing his eyes. "All the incidents involving the well are merely a game he designed. Just like with the botulinum killer, he taught this murderer how to commit the 'perfect crime' using an elevator. In other words, even without expertise, anyone with enough persistence and discretion could have done this."

"But...why would Kyougoku go through all that trouble?"

"Asukai. Say someone murders a person using a kitchen knife. Would the knife manufacturer be charged with a crime?"

"Huh?" Asukai seemed perplexed for a moment, but he eventually managed to reply, "No... I don't think they would."

"There's your answer," Ayatsuji said. "Just like with the botulinum killer, this person committed murder because they wanted to. The mastermind who taught the culprit how to commit the perfect crime is a mere tool the culprit used. Thus, the mastermind can't be targeted by my skill. That's why he does this."

None of Kyougoku's crimes could be prosecuted.

In normal criminal cases, trying someone as an instigator meant proving they

were directly related to the commission of the crime. However, if the perpetrator carried out the crime on their own with the intent to kill, then there would need to be solid evidence that Kyougoku drove them to murder or that the murder would never have happened without his involvement.

Nevertheless, the military police and the Special Division weren't pushovers; they would step on more than a few toes to get what they wanted. They could find an excuse to collar someone, either for another crime or by getting the criminal to turn themselves in. So why was Kyougoku so obsessed with keeping his hands clean?

Tsujimura, who had been standing behind Ayatsuji and Asukai in silence, suddenly spoke up.

"In other words, what appears to be an isolated incident with a single murderer targeting a single victim is just a scheme to challenge Detective Ayatsuji."

The detective didn't reply but continued to focus on a single point in space in silence.

Asukai observed Ayatsuji's expression.

Ayatsuji and Kyougoku—yin and yang, right and wrong. Both of these men were of a world beyond Asukai's comprehension. The reason Kyougoku refused to commit any crimes himself was solely because he wanted to challenge Ayatsuji's skill—the ultimate power, one that defied fate and never failed to kill its target. Put simply, all Kyougoku wanted to do was test the infallible nature of Ayatsuji's skill.

Nevertheless, there was something still bothering Asukai.

Kyougoku was taunting Ayatsuji. That much was clear. If Kyougoku made even a single mistake that exposed his crimes, then Ayatsuji's skill would kill him, and Ayatsuji would "win."

However, what was the reverse? Kyougoku squealing with excitement because he defeated Ayatsuji and tarnished his reputation? Was that actually plausible? All of Kyougoku's challenges had been to "solve a perfect crime." Therefore, even if Ayatsuji failed to find the perpetrator or solve the mystery,

nothing would happen. No matter how many times he accepted these challenges, he wouldn't die, let alone even get hurt.

Kyougoku, on the other hand, would meet his demise if he made the smallest of mistakes, and their match would be over.

*So why does Kyougoku continue to challenge Ayatsuji when he's at this much of a disadvantage?*

"Let's begin our investigation," Ayatsuji muttered, interrupting Asukai's train of thought. "We'll check the surveillance footage. It doesn't matter how perfect the crime was; there should be a video of the elevator being tampered with. Then we'll see our 'mizuchi charmer' doing just that."

"But...where should we even start?"

"He most likely rigged the elevator after learning that we were coming here today," Ayatsuji insisted. "Kyougoku's trying to challenge me, after all. We'll check the footage around the machine room from last night up to this morning."

Asukai swiftly ordered his team to retrieve the footage.

\*

There was a ton of video, but Ayatsuji nonetheless reviewed everything: the entrances and exits, the elevator pit in the basement, and the area around the machine room on the rooftop.

Meanwhile, the dozen or so monitors in the Ministry of Justice's security room displayed surveillance footage. As one would expect from a central government facility, the high-quality video captured everything. In fact, the visuals were so crystal clear that one could even see the color of people's eyebrows as they walked by.

Ayatsuji quietly observed the footage like a hawk. His gaze was relentlessly sharp, like a cruel king glaring at his frightened retainer. Asukai absent-mindedly watched him.

Asukai knew three criminals who confessed after being exposed to that piercing gaze alone. In a single investigation, Ayatsuji could handle the workload of an entire police department solo. So although Asukai wanted to keep up with

Ayatsuji, he wasn't expecting to find a clue in all this footage before the detective did.

Instead, he decided to use his time to speak to his younger colleague.

"Tsujimura."

Tsujimura, who'd been watching the surveillance footage, turned in his direction.

"How many years have you been at this job?"

"Two," was her honest reply. She stared at him, trying to glean the intent of his question.

"Are you scared?"

She seemed genuinely surprised. "Of what?"

"Your job's dangerous. Death follows you wherever you go."

Tsujimura faintly smirked. "The same goes for you, Asukai. You're overseeing lots of gruesome cases."

"That's not what I meant," he replied, his expression serious. "I've known Detective Ayatsuji for a while, so I know most agents in the Division aren't willing to do what you're doing. Nobody wants to get involved with a Special A-Grade Dangerous Skill User, especially the 'cold-blooded reaper'—not even the toughest agents."

Tsujimura stared right back into Asukai's eyes.

"Tsujimura, did you volunteer for this job so you could get revenge?"

"No," she immediately declared.

"You were almost too quick to deny it," Asukai replied. "I'm not saying you shouldn't lie to me, but if you're lying to yourself, I'd fix that as soon as possible."

After a few moments of silence, Tsujimura quickly glanced at Ayatsuji.

The detective was completely focused on the surveillance footage. He was observing a dozen or so people on nearly just as many monitors, watching their each and every move while taking note of even the smallest details of their



outfits. Concentration like that wouldn't be easy to break.

"Everyone tells me to reconsider," Tsujimura quietly muttered. "That it's too dangerous. But I have a full grasp of the detective's skill, and I don't think it's dangerous."

"Really?"

"Really. His skill only works on individuals or groups that commit murder or particularly vicious attempts at murder. It needs evidence that they had the intent to kill, that they were the only one who could have committed the crime. And the target must be the culprit in a case that Detective Ayatsuji was hired to solve. Those are the conditions. Once he takes on a case, the criminal will always die in an accident, regardless of what happens. Even if the case gets canceled midway, once his skill activates, there's no stopping it. Just like how once you say something, you can't unsay it."

Asukai reflected on what she said. Ayatsuji's skill was absolute. If his deductions were correct, then the criminal died; otherwise, nothing would happen. It was basically an infallible truth detector.

And if Ayatsuji failed to identify the criminal, the Division would "dispose" of him. A homicide detective who couldn't determine the truth was nothing more than a walking time bomb. Ayatsuji knew this, and yet he continued investigating. If he got it right, the criminal died. If not, *he* died. But despite the risk, the detective had solved *every single case that'd come to him*.

A chill ran down Asukai's spine when he thought about the mental fortitude Ayatsuji must have had.

*I get it now.*

That was when it finally hit Asukai. That was what "winning" was to Kyougoku. He wanted to make Ayatsuji mess up and get taken out by the Division. That's why Kyougoku kept producing these perfect crimes and risked his life to challenge the detective. And Ayatsuji kept working on cases despite knowing that.

A man who could create the perfect crime versus a man who could solve the perfect crime.

If even the smallest piece of evidence was connected to Kyougoku, the Sorcerer would die. If Ayatsuji missed even one criminal, the detective would die. It was like walking a tightrope over a pool of sharks. It all came down to who fell off the tightrope first.

“Damn it!”

The sudden, furious roar echoed throughout the room, causing everyone to jump.

“Damn you, Kyougoku! Is this your little game?!” Ayatsuji shouted, slamming his hands against the desk. His terrifying rage made everyone’s hair stand on end.

“Did you find something, Detective?”

“Are you people blind? Look at the man on the screen.”

Everyone’s gaze shifted toward the monitor displaying an employee-only entrance. But the footage, which was timestamped along with the date and camera number, showed a few different people.

“Rewind it five seconds,” Ayatsuji demanded. A security officer promptly followed his orders.

The screen then displayed a man wearing a collared shirt. He had well-kept hair and calm eyes. He honestly looked like some run-of-the-mill bureaucrat who had just gone for a round of golf with the director of some private-sector corporation. There was nothing particularly suspicious about him.

Asukai closely observed the man, since according to the detective, there was something unnatural about him—perhaps his clothing or whatever he had on him.

“You can’t be serious. This doesn’t take a genius to figure out. Anybody can see that this is our guy,” Ayatsuji suddenly said, insulting everyone staring at the screen.

“Ah!” Tsujimura shouted out of nowhere. “It can’t be...!” she groaned.

“Did you notice something, Tsujimura?” Asukai asked.

“Look here.” She pointed at the screen, her hand trembling. “His finger...!”

That was when Asukai noticed it as well. *The man was missing the tip of his left ring finger.*

“Normally, Kyougoku likes to use puppets who don’t even know they’re being controlled. But some accept orders directly to do his dirty work. People who follow his every command, willing to die for his cause... Kyougoku calls them his ‘familiar’ or ‘*shikigami*.’ His spirits must be possessing these familiars via his skill. We’ve never had any idea who or where these people are. Until now, that is.”

Ayatsuji then surveyed everyone in the room. “This proves one thing, though. The eighteenth criminal from Reigo Island—the Engineer—is Kyougoku’s familiar,” he added with a strained voice.

“Is that...true?” Tsujimura said. “The Engineer...is involved, too?”

“It’s right up Kyougoku’s alley.” Ayatsuji nodded. “The Engineer was behind the elevator incident, and he knew we’d watch this footage. Check it out.”

Ayatsuji resumed the video.

The man, who was missing a part of his ring finger, switched the heavy-looking golf bag to his other shoulder and stopped in place. He then glanced up at the security camera and smirked as if to say, “Catch me if you can.” It was extremely subtle; normally, no one would have noticed it, but when they saw that smirk, it became as clear as day.

“There should be more footage of the Engineer after he finishes setting up the trap,” Ayatsuji told the security officer. “Forty-five minutes to an hour later.”

The security officer began fast-forwarding the video, and it wasn’t long before that man appeared again. It was the same camera fifty minutes later, displaying the same man.

“...Look at his bag. It has four cylindrical cartridges in the side pocket. They’re demolition charges—the chemicals inside react to cause a steam explosion that can take down buildings. He used that to make the elevator collapse. That’s why we couldn’t detect any explosive residue on the scene.”

Ayatsuji pushed a few switches, arranging still images of the Engineer

entering and leaving the building so they were side by side.

“He went from six cartridges...down to four,” Asukai muttered while staring at the screen.

“Do you think they were spares?” Tsujimura asked.

“No, this is the Engineer,” Ayatsuji said. “He carefully plans every detail in advance. I highly doubt he would need that many spares. There must be another reason...”

The detective suddenly fell silent. It was as if he’d sent his soul into the depths of his mind, leaving his human shell behind.

“...Detective Ayatsuji?” Tsujimura timidly peeked at his face.

“Asukai, I need a list of every building in a four-mile radius that has elevators with card-based security. I also need you to set up an investigation HQ and deploy the local police. This murder was a warning.”

“A warning?”

“The Engineer still has four bombs on him because he’ll be using them. He intends to kill at least one more person, and soon.”

“He’s going to kill again?!”

“If he didn’t refill his supply of explosives, his next target must be close. With time for transport and setup, they’re likely within four miles.”

“Contact HQ and gather every city police officer available. Send out images of this man’s face,” Asukai ordered his subordinates. They immediately nodded, then spread out in different directions to handle their duties.

“All we need to do now is let the police do their job,” Ayatsuji commented as he watched.

“Detective Ayatsuji!” Tsujimura leaned forward. “I’ll join this investigation, too!”

After observing her for a few moments, Ayatsuji replied, “Am I hearing things? Your mission was to supervise me, not arrest the killer. My job was to solve the mystery of the well, not force my way on to a manhunt. I believe your

only duty right now is to wait here.”

“But...! It’s the Engineer!”

Ayatsuji didn’t reply. He observed Tsujimura’s expression, trying to look beyond the desperation on her face.

“I...I have...to ask him about my mother, and you need to help me. Don’t you at least owe me that? As the man who solved the Reigo Island murders?”

After a few seconds of silence, the detective pulled out his pipe and replied, “I don’t owe you that.”

“But—!”

“But I wouldn’t mind helping, depending on what you have to offer. I need something in return. Hmm... How about you do anything I say for an entire day of my choosing?”

“A-anything...?” Tsujimura’s expression froze for a split second, but she soon made up her mind and said resolutely, “All right. You’ve got yourself a deal.”

“It’s settled, then.” Ayatsuji tapped his pipe.

“I’ll go get the car!”

Ayatsuji and Asukai watched as she sprinted out the door.

“Are you sure about this, Detective Ayatsuji? She’s obsessed with this Engineer. He killed her mother, after all... But if she’s so focused on revenge, then Kyougoku might exploit her clouded judgment, right?”

“If she lets that happen, then that was the extent of her worth. I’m not her father; it’s not my job to worry about her.” The warmthless voice naturally turned Asukai’s head. “Also, let me correct you on one point. The Engineer isn’t the object of her revenge. He didn’t kill her mother.”

“He didn’t? Then who is she actually—?”

Ayatsuji slowly turned his head and locked eyes with Asukai. For a brief moment, the seasoned agent’s heart stopped. He felt like a small animal before a snake.

“Me.”

Cold air escaped the detective's throat.

"I killed Tsujimura's mother. *She was one of the Reigo Island killers.*"

\*

My silver Aston Martin was hurtling down the street. The city looked no different than usual today. The warm sunlight illuminated the asphalt, and a roadside shop's sale flag fluttered in the wind.

However, this familiar scenery was slowly being contaminated. A patrolman was listening intently to his wireless radio. The military police were hastily setting up a post. A crowd of cop cars whirled by, sirens blaring.

Because at this moment, the entire four-mile radius around the Ministry of Justice was under martial law; right now, a murderer was preparing for his next kill.

"Let's start by searching the nearest facilities," I suggested from behind the wheel. "First, we'll check out the nearby hospital, then we'll move on to the industrial factories."

However, Detective Ayatsuji didn't reply. He quietly stared out the back seat window.

"Detective, are you listening?"

"What should I do, hmm?" the detective suddenly wondered aloud.

"To the Engineer?"

"No. To you." Detective Ayatsuji lifted his head and looked at me through the rearview mirror. "Did all the sunshine and rainbows filling your head make you forget our deal? You promised to do anything I say for an entire day of my choice."

"Urk!"

*Oh, right.*

I'd almost forgotten because that entire moment had gone by like a blur.

"There are two main points to this deal: One is the day I choose, and the other is that you'll do anything. Put simply, I'm not limited to just one command. There are countless things I can order you to do for an entire day.

Fairy tales talk about getting ‘three wishes,’ but this goes far beyond that. An entire day... I could get a couple hundred wishes out of you, even.”

Once he was done with his verbose gloating, I hastily checked my rearview mirror.

The detective was faintly smirking.

That was when it hit me.

*He set me up!*

The moment he showed us that surveillance footage, it was already too late. He knew it would end up like this.

“You know what? The deal is—”

“Off? Sure, I’m fine with that,” the detective easily assured me. “In that case, I’ll get out of the car and report you to the Special Division for going rogue.”

“Ngh...!”

I couldn’t argue with that.

“Yes, that’s the face I wanted to see,” Detective Ayatsuji nonchalantly said. “You know, I’ve really grown to appreciate the face you make when you’re frustrated. Maybe I should have a dollmaker carve me a replica for my collection.”

Speaking to this man made me sometimes forget that as his overseer, I had life-and-death power over him.

*I’m an agent, damn it...*

“You’re free to make fun of me all you want,” I began, “but don’t forget that if I tell the Division that you’re ‘in danger of going out of control,’ it’ll be all over for you!”

“Interesting. You would betray their trust in you by filing a false report. An act befitting your idea of a top-class secret agent.”

“Nnngh...!”

There was no way to argue with that, either.

“Don’t be so down,” the detective said to me. “You may be a crude, inexperienced troublemaker, but you have redeeming qualities. You’re still young, and you learn fast. It’s a good thing you got assigned to work with me; you would be absolutely useless otherwise. I hope you can absorb everything I teach you and become a decent servant as soon as you possibly can.”

Everything fell onto the car floor when I slammed the brakes.

“I am not your servant!”

“Not yet, you aren’t.” His expression remained blank. “I’m looking forward to our little deal, though.”

But right before I could argue any further, my cell phone started to ring. It was most likely Inspector Asukai calling me about the Engineer.

“Tsujimura speaking.”

After pressing the button for the mic on my earphones, I immediately discovered that I was wrong. It wasn’t Asukai.

“...Sakaguchi?!”

\*

The Engineer blended in with the crowd.

That weekday morning, the people came and went with cheerful looks on their faces. The Engineer watched these “unremarkable” people with similar cheer.

Each of the passersby appeared to be individuals with their own dignity. But that was merely a misconception—or at least, that was how the Engineer felt. These people were “parts” and most certainly not independent individuals. They were just components of a massive system. Thousands and thousands of “parts” merged into a colossal machine—society.

However, the Engineer wasn’t like them. He’d killed numerous people in the perfect crime. He had cheated the system. Would a component secretly destroy an enormous system from the inside? The answer was no. In other words, he was not a component of the system. He was not a “part.”

Therefore, he alone was different from the rest. He was an independent,



complete “individual.”

The Engineer was walking with a golf bag over his shoulder while softly humming an old jazz tune. *Bet the cops expect I’m driving*, he thought. Therefore, they would be monitoring the roads, searching cars, and checking highway surveillance footage.

*I can see right through them because I understand how they—the system’s components—work, but they don’t understand how a complete individual like me works. Information inequality at its finest. That’s why I’ve never been caught.*

And that was why he was traveling on foot to outsmart them. This way, he would also be able to quickly respond to any changes. Obviously, he’d already memorized every possible escape route in the unlikely event that he had to flee.

Being a complete *individual* came with responsibility. It was an antisocial existence; nobody was there to help if you failed. This wasn’t a life just anyone could live. The heavy burden and guilt would crush most people. But that didn’t matter, for the large majority of people wouldn’t gain anything from betraying the big system. People were weak, so they needed to band together. They prioritized creating a big system—the bizarre system they called society—over gaining individuality.

The Engineer ascended the staircase into the building. The people passing by felt nothing toward him. He held the glass door for one person who thanked him with a smile and a bow. That actually felt kind of nice.

*If these “parts” knew what I was about to do inside this building, they’d shriek in terror. I’m aware that they’re just measly parts, but they have no idea that I’m an individual. Another example of information inequality.*

After making his way into the janitorial hall, he took out the workman uniform in his bag, swiftly ran his arms through the sleeves, and began heading even farther down the passage, visualizing the building’s layout in his head.

The Engineer eventually stopped in front of a locked metal door standing between him and his destination. However, this did not take him by surprise. Nothing was impossible as long as he obeyed the well.

After examining his surroundings to make sure he wasn't being watched, he whipped out a can of compressed air from his bag, flipped it upside down, and sprayed the doorknob.

When you turn canned air with alternative CFCs upside down and spray, low-temperature liquid gas comes out. Not cold enough to kill a human being, but enough to make the lock brittle and relatively easy to break.

After meticulously spraying, he turned the doorknob while ramming into the door as hard as he could with his shoulder. The metal instantly snapped, and the door opened.

*The well is a fountain of information. It blessed me with the techniques and knowledge needed to become an individual instead of a part—and it mentally prepared me, too.*

*If only I had its help five years ago for Reigo Island, I could've committed an even more perfect crime. That random detective wouldn't have exposed the events that happened there, and my accomplices wouldn't have been killed while I happened to be away. It was such a shame.*

*But there's no use lamenting the past. What's important now is the present.*

The Engineer leaped down onto the area below while recalling the steps to set up the bomb.

The city police were most likely checking the hospitals and factories right now. In fact, they were probably searching every place with an elevator that could be destroyed and kill someone. Their calculations were logical and well-founded given the trend.

*And that's exactly why they won't be able to stop me.*

The Engineer dropped down—onto the *empty, elevated railway*.

Where could you kill the most people with only four demolition charges? The answer was *here*.

This railway went through the entire town. The Engineer gazed at the cityscape around him. The station itself was not far in the distance. People were coming and going on the streets below.

The Engineer checked his watch. It was a race against time now. Before the next train came, he would plant the demolition charges on the rails and destroy them. He'd rehearsed this more times than he could count; he knew that with this method, the charges' vibrations wouldn't bring the train to a sudden stop.

*With this, I will be one step closer to becoming an independent individual—to becoming special, unlike all the rabble. And someday, I'll be like him...*

Once the Engineer set up the second demolition charge, he lifted his head, sensing a presence—multiple people.

There was a voice.

*And that voice said to me...*

\*

"Too bad, Engineer. You lose," Detective Ayatsuji declared.

Agents surrounded the Engineer with their guns drawn, causing the man to freeze on the tracks. He was carrying a golf bag and wearing a workman's uniform with well-kept hair hanging over his almond-shaped eyes. He was the eighteenth Reigo Island murderer and Kyougoku's familiar.

"Government dogs," the Engineer muttered. "How'd you know I'd be here?"

"I figured it out from your crime patterns," Detective Ayatsuji said. "You showed the demolition charges on camera to make us think you'd hit another elevator, only to go elsewhere and cause greater destruction. That way, you could completely tarnish the reputations of both me and the military police. I determined you'd aim for a bigger target, like a train station."

The detective surveyed the area.

"If you blew up these tracks, the train would easily derail and fall on the town below. It would've been catastrophic. You would have killed not just everyone on the train but countless people in the town as well. That's the most damage you could inflict with those four tiny demolition charges I'm sure you're so proud of. However, we already contacted the rail company and had them stop the trains, so your little scheme isn't going to work."

He glanced at Inspector Asukai behind him, who nodded to confirm.

Detective Ayatsuji had predicted the Engineer's moves from the very beginning. He'd sent the city police to search other facilities with elevators to put the Engineer off guard, then he positioned Asukai and other agents here. If the Engineer traveled on foot, that narrowed down the target to this station.

In other words, he saw right through the Engineer.

"I see... So you're the Homicide Detective." The Engineer, slightly pale in the face, glared at Ayatsuji.

"No need to rush. We'll have plenty of time for introductions later. I have a lot to ask you first," the detective told him. "I can't wait. You seem far more loose-lipped than Kyougoku."

After collecting the demolition charges, one of the agents reached for the golf bag when—

"Don't open it up yet," Detective Ayatsuji sharply demanded. "This man almost certainly killed the deputy director, but if I see concrete evidence of the murder, my skill will activate and kill him. It would be quite the sight, of course, but he doesn't deserve such a quick, easy death."

The agent quickly stepped away from the bag.

Once the detective's skill activated, there was no way to cancel it. Proving a criminal did the crime was no different from sentencing them to death. That was why he couldn't allow himself to see the evidence just yet—that bag most likely contained hard evidence. If it had a drill with a silencer or spare wire, then the skill would activate immediately.

"Tsuji-mura." The detective suddenly shifted his gaze at me and pointed toward the criminal with his chin. "You've probably been really stressed lately. Cuff him. Make sure to give his arms a good twist while you're at it, too."

I decided to take him up on the offer and reached for the handcuffs at my waist.

"You're under arrest," I told the Engineer.

"Sorry, but I won't go down that easy."

He swiftly pulled out a demolition charge and pressed it against his throat.

Not even a second later, every agent had their guns pointing at him.

Detective Ayatsuji was the only one unfazed. “You’re a surprisingly boring man. Brandishing a bomb like that? You watch too many movies. Do you really think we’d let a vile criminal like you escape just because you’re threatening to take your own life?”

“Who knows? I bet you folks have a lot of questions for me... Can’t have me die just yet.”

“Drop the explosive!” I shouted at the Engineer, my gun aimed at him.

“Sure, I’ll be more than happy to accommodate...if you drop your weapons and bring me a getaway car.”

When I glanced at Detective Ayatsuji, he was blankly observing the Engineer.

It was a strange position to be in. We couldn’t let him escape, of course, but I wanted to keep the risk of killing him to a minimum.

I rapidly began to rack my brain for a solution. Perhaps I could talk with him until he let his guard down. There were more than enough agents here to nab him.

“If you think I won’t shoot you, you’re wrong,” I growled, slowly tiptoeing closer to the Engineer. “Do you remember the Reigo Island murders five years ago?”

“What?”

“You were part of the group behind that. And my mother was among the seventeen killers,” I said, keeping my emotions in check.

“Oh?” The Engineer looked slightly amused. “The agent’s mother was a murderer, huh? So you’re using your hereditary murder skills to solve cases. Intriguing.”

An almost uncontrollable rage briefly swelled in my chest, but I managed to force it into the back of my mind.

“I don’t know how much she was involved in the murders, but I do know that you’re the only one left who knew her as a murderer,” I quietly replied, readjusting my grip on my pistol and making sure he was still in my sights. “I

won't let you get away. Not until I hear the truth from you."

"Oh, I remember Reigo Island, all right." He smirked. "I led the whole effort. I'm the only one who understands the real meaning behind it. Nobody knew what it meant to take the life of another and how it changed you. They were just focused on making it look like those tourists were still alive so they could continue sucking their bank accounts dry. Real money-hungry slobs, which was why it was so easy to manipulate them. Like teaching a dog tricks."

The Engineer stepped toward me. That smug smirk looked plastered onto his face.

This vile man disgusted me to my very core. The sweat in my pistol-holding hand began to burn.

"I know nothing about my mother during the last few years of her life," I said. My head was pounding as if it were trying to send a warning to my heart. "If she really was a murderer, then I'll discard the mother I thought I knew. But if she was just your little puppet, then I'll have to *take revenge on Detective Ayatsuji for killing my poor mother, who was simply being controlled*. Did my mother bloody her own two hands? Or did she only contribute to your scheme?"

I could feel my chest burning as I spoke.

*Why am I talking about this? I'm only trying to buy us some time. Where's this even coming from?*

"You're real cute when you're angry, young lady," the Engineer said, grinning. "I just remembered: There was a woman who looked just like you when she got angry. About your age, too. Pale eyes, a small scar on her right ear..."

My mother.

She'd told me when I was little that she got that scar at work.

"Such a plain, boring, submissive woman. I barely even remember what she did now. She died when a burning house collapsed on her."

It was as if a bolt of lightning were surging through my veins.

"...You...!"

My blood was boiling. I couldn't kill this man until we got enough information

out of him.

But...

“A puppet, huh? I’ve used people like puppets in many of my murders.”

The Engineer’s gaze was gentle; it felt like he could see right into the most vulnerable chamber of my heart.

“Men can be controlled with money and ego, but women are easier. Especially weak-willed ones. Your mother was eating out of my hand. Want me to show your body how I managed that?”

All reason began to crumble. I firmly cocked my gun and took another step forward.

“Stop, Tsujimura. Don’t take the bait.”

Detective Ayatsuji’s voice sounded strangely muffled and far away. My index finger was convulsing.

“We can’t have you destroying evidence that easily, Tsujimura.”

That voice came out of nowhere, followed by a shadowy figure whirling by like a black wind.

It only took three moves. The back of the Engineer’s left knee was kicked in, his right pinkie was snapped backward, and his left elbow was halfway rotated in the opposite direction. Honestly, it felt to me like each part happened at the same time.

Before the Engineer could even scream, the shadowy figure grabbed the demolition charge, tossed it into the distance, and pulled the criminal’s shoulder joint back while slamming him onto the ground. It was over in the blink of an eye.

“Good work, Tsujimura. We’ll take over from here.”

Another individual slowly approached the Engineer from the opposite side. He wore a russet suit and round glasses, similar to how you’d expect a college professor to dress. Quiet and mild mannered, he nonetheless had a razor-sharp, frigid glow behind his eyes.

“Sakaguchi,” I muttered.

“Do you remember what I told you? ‘Don’t ask a cowboy to lasso a lion.’ The moment a high-ranking Ministry of Justice bureaucrat was murdered, this case became too big for a detective agency to handle. That man is a lion, and it’s the Special Division’s duty to pursue him.”

Two individuals stood by Sakaguchi while he spoke. One was a woman dressed in a casual suit, chewing gum and defiantly glaring at her surroundings with a sword in hand. Hanging at her waist was a black sheath given only to people who worked for the government.

The other individual, a tall man wearing a black suit with biker gloves, was the one who’d neutralized the Engineer in the blink of an eye. The fact that his center of gravity wasn’t even budging proved that he was a highly trained martial artist.

They worked directly under Sakaguchi. Superb fighters even within the Special Division, they were also Sakaguchi’s bodyguards. A testament to how many enemies my mentor had.

My mentor, Ango Sakaguchi—assistant counselor, Special Division for Unusual Powers, Ministry of Home Affairs.

“Sakaguchi,” Detective Ayatsuji quietly muttered.

“Hello, Detective.” Sakaguchi politely smiled. “My apologies for not personally stopping by very often. I will have you compensated for your services later, as per usual.”

The man wearing biker gloves grabbed the Engineer by the shoulder and single-handedly hoisted him to his feet. No surprise there—I’d seen this guy crush an apple in one hand. There was no escaping that vise grip.

“I wouldn’t recommend taking over this case, Sakaguchi,” Detective Ayatsuji said. “We still don’t have a picture of Kyougoku’s whole plan. Boxing this case up while we’ve yet to understand it all will just fan the flames.”

“The Special Division won’t burn down, Detective Ayatsuji,” Sakaguchi said, smirking. “Nobody can manage that. We’re here to deny the Ministry of Justice the means to attack us. They’ll claim that as an opposing organization, we



conspired to have Deputy Director Sakashita murdered. Therefore, we need to find the ringleader behind this man in order to prove the Special Division's innocence." He coldly glared down at the Engineer.

The detective shrugged. "So you're going to torture him, huh?"

"We won't need to resort to those measures," Sakaguchi replied. "He'll be dying to confess to everything on his own."

I silently watched their exchange. Sakaguchi was a top-level agent who had completed many important skill-based cases over the years, earning his lofty position at a young age. He specialized in data gathering and analysis and tracked down enemy skill users using his unimpassioned intellect and judgment. I'd been training to be an investigator when he took me under his wing at the Special Division.

"Our job here is done. It's in the Division's hands now," Asukai began as he returned his gun to his holster. "Let's head out."

"Can I say something, Inspector Asukai?" an agent asked while putting away his gun. "There's something bothering me."

Asukai turned around. "What is it, Yoshino?"

"It's a sound. What is this sound...?"

The young agent named Yoshino frowned, his eyes wandering the sky. He had short hair and freckles and was probably around the same age as me or a little younger. Maybe it was the slightly oversized suit, but he seemed a little undependable.

"I don't hear anything..."

Noticing Asukai's eyes searching the skies naturally got me looking around as well, but I didn't see or hear anything unusual.

"I definitely can," Yoshino insisted. "There it is again. It's like...something being rubbed together. Like fabric...or rope... And it's getting louder and louder."

*A rope being rubbed together?*

"Hey, Detective."

The Engineer's sudden voice drew our eyes toward him.

"What?" Detective Ayatsuji coldly replied.

"He told me to say hi for him," the Engineer began. "The Sorcerer. That, and he has some valuable information for you."

After a few moments of silence, the detective frigidly smiled. "Oh?"

"He said he only wants to tell you since he's known you for so long. And also, the Special Division and other guys can't listen in." The Engineer slyly smirked. "There's a radio and a hands-free mike in my coat pocket. Use those."

Detective Ayatsuji glanced at Sakaguchi, who pondered for a moment before softly nodding.

The detective searched the man's coat until he found a communicator. It was turned on. After carefully observing it to make sure there were no traps or tricks, he put the earbuds in and narrowed his eyes.

\*

Ayatsuji heard a voice—one he wished he would never have to hear again.

**"First, allow me to make one thing clear,"** the voice began. **"There's no need to worry much. I have no intention of harming you."**

It was a quiet, hoarse voice that he knew all too well.

"Kyougoku," he suddenly said. "What's something you despise?"

**"Where did that come from, Detective?"**

But Ayatsuji didn't reply, so Kyougoku reluctantly answered, **"Well...I do dislike unfinished novels."**

"Then that's what you are to me: an unfinished novel."

A few seconds went by until Kyougoku cackled mirthfully. **"What an honor."**

"What was so important that you had to go through your lackey to talk to me?" Ayatsuji asked. "Must be tough being a lonely old man, Kyougoku."

**"Didn't you know? Picking on young lads like yourself is a pastime of the elderly."**

"Just get to the point."

**“I have a favor to ask of you.”** Kyougoku’s laugh was ominous and hoarse. **“Of course, you will be rewarded for your help. Out of courtesy, since we’re such close friends. Kubo over there—you and your people call him the Engineer—I’ll give you a chance to speak with him. And in return, I want you to let him go.”**

“...What?” The wrinkle in Ayatsuji’s brow creased even more.

“Detective Ayatsuji, what is Kyougoku telling you?” Sakaguchi asked. He was standing slightly away from the detective, who was alone with the headset over his ears so that the Division, the Engineer, and the other agents couldn’t hear the conversation.

“Kyougoku...,” Ayatsuji muttered, pulling the microphone away from his mouth slightly, “...is demanding we release the Engineer.”

“...Absurd.”

The rest of the agents murmured among each other. Although overcome with surprise, the Engineer eventually smiled.

“Ha-ha... Ha-ha-ha-ha! Yes! Incredible!” He burst out laughing. “*He* saw through all this!”

“Kyougoku, can you hear me? I’m going to have to decline,” Ayatsuji said. “If you’re not going to show up, then stay out of it. We’re taking your underling with us.”

**“I said you would be rewarded for your troubles. In exchange, I’ll give you all a chance—to save your distinguished allies.”**

Ayatsuji narrowed his eyes.

“Can’t you hear that sound?! I don’t know what it is, but it’s getting close!” Yoshino shouted as he stared into the sky.

Immediately, all the agents got into stance with their weapons.

“I figured it out... I know where it’s coming from! It’s an enemy attack! The noise is coming from right here!” Yoshino screamed while pointing his gun...

...at his own chin.

“I have to stop the enemy!”

And just like that—

“Yoshino, don’t!” Asukai yelled.

—he pulled the trigger.

The 9mm bullet passed right through his chin and tongue, then was sent spiraling through his skull. It shattered his sphenoid bone, throttled his cerebellum, and destroyed his brain stem and parietal lobe before exiting through the top of his head. The bullet gradually slowed down, scattering bone, blood, and brain matter in its wake.

The impact knocked Yoshino’s head back, throwing him off balance and causing him to trip over the train’s safety rail behind him. It was only around forty feet until he hit the ground below, soon followed by the screams of passersby. All the while, everyone simply watched the shocking event unfold in mute horror.

**“People often say my skill is weak,”** Kyougoku whispered in Ayatsuji’s ear. **“But at the right time and place, it can be very effective. By the way, I had an *itsuki* possess that fellow. A strangling ghoul that makes those it possesses hang themselves with rope. It appears in the *Taiping Yulan* and *Strange Tales* —”**

“I will kill you. If not with my skill, then with my own two hands. Be ready, Kyougoku.”

**“Oh dear. Your threats are no good for this old heart of mine, Ayatsuji.”**

The phantom’s voice was immediately followed by even more screams.

“I can hear it... I can hear it! It’s a rope!”

“The voices... I can hear them in my head!”

“Get it out! Ugh, this goddamned sound...!”

Three of the five remaining agents screamed in rage and confusion as they placed their pistols under their jaws in unison. Their faces were completely serious, determined.

“Drop your weapons!” Asukai yelled.

“All of you, get ahold of yourselves!” Tsujimura cried. “You’re being attacked by the enemy’s skill!”

There wasn’t much else they could do when the agents already had their guns against their own chins.

**“They, too, will lose their heads if you don’t release Kubo—the Engineer. Hmm... Saying that out loud makes it sound so trite, even embarrassing. But, well, it’s the truth.”**

“Stop this, Kyougoku,” Ayatsuji promptly demanded. “We get it. I’ll play your little game. Just stop making these agents kill themselves.” He shot Sakaguchi a piercing glance. “Sakaguchi, even if we let a scrub like this go, we’ll have other chances to catch him. Release the Engineer.”

“But—”

“It’s not up for discussion. Do it,” the detective barked.

“...Very well,” Sakaguchi said with a scowl. “But this man’s face is known to the police citywide now. There’s no way he’ll escape.”

“You hear that, Kyougoku?” Ayatsuji said into the radio.

**“Yes, I did. I’m not worried, though.”**

All of a sudden, Tsujimura looked down at the tracks. “The tracks...are shaking.”

When Ayatsuji followed her gaze, he noticed the fine sand on the dark-gray tracks was almost convulsing, and the tremors were gradually getting more violent.

“So that’s how you’re going to do this? Damn it,” the detective spat. “Everyone, off the tracks! Now!”

A train was rapidly approaching—not a single person missed it.

“What’s going on?” Asukai muttered in bewilderment. “None of the trains should be running—”

“Everyone, get to the edge of the tracks! Drag anyone pointing a gun to their

head if you have to!” Sakaguchi hollered.

They all immediately leaped into action. The train screeched closer, only a few dozen yards away.

Once everyone got off the tracks, the locomotive came to a gradual stop before them. It was a single black vintage passenger train.

**“Ayatsuji, I want you to board that train car together with Kubo. A special voyage, just for you two,”** Kyougoku said with a laugh.

The door automatically opened with the sound of compressed air releasing. The inside of the car was bright—and completely empty.

“Kyougoku, I’m only going to say this once,” Ayatsuji began. “You better not regret letting me on this train.”

**“Yes, I thought you might say that.”**

The radio suddenly cut out.

## CHAPTER 5

### Inside Passenger Train *Morning Cloudy*

The black train car transporting Kubo and Ayatsuji made its way forward beneath the suddenly cloudy, gray sky. The railroad tracks screeched, the car wobbling like an elderly herbivore running as quickly as it could.

It wasn't long before the train found its way into an underground tunnel, making it no longer possible to track from aboveground.

Two men were inside the brightly lit train car, leaning against the wall near the door. One was Kubo, a murderer known as the Engineer, still gleefully grinning as he stared into the darkness outside the window. The second man—the Homicide Detective, Yukito Ayatsuji—remained perfectly still with his eyes closed and his arms crossed. The conductor's car was empty; instead, there were multiple machines stacked on top of one another, which automatically controlled the train's speed.

"Hey, Detective. How long have you been at this job?" the Engineer suddenly asked.

"Twenty years," Ayatsuji replied, his eyes still closed.

"Seriously? So ever since you were in diapers, eh? How many cases have you solved?"

"Fifty thousand."

"Sheesh. And how many people have you killed?"

"Two billion."

"...Detective," Kubo said, frowning. "I get that you don't want to talk to a criminal, but do not underestimate me."

"Oh? Why should I?" Ayatsuji asked, opening his eyes a crack.

“I’m just taking a joy ride back to my hideout. You, on the other hand, were coerced into being here. We’re not the same. You should be trembling in your boots trying to study me. Do you even realize that?”

“Yes,” the detective replied coldly. “You’re absolutely right. We’re not the same. I don’t go around committing crimes and acting like I’m special after being spoon-fed information from someone in a well.”

“Excuse me?” Kubo’s expression changed.

“Did you honestly believe that no one else knew about the well?”

Ayatsuji glared back at Kubo, then took out his pipe as leisurely as he would at home before placing it between his lips.

“A well that grants people evil. It sounds like any other urban legend: very cliché and unimaginative. But beneath it is an extremely elaborate, clever selection system for finding someone with the brains and malice to commit the perfect crime.”

Kubo looked flabbergasted. “You’ve...already figured that much out, huh?”

“The trick to breaking a case is to solve the easy stuff the fastest,” Ayatsuji replied. “At the bottom of the well was an ISBN code for the first edition of *The Selfish Gene*. It’s a very famous book even today. You can find it just about anywhere. But the original 1976 edition has collector’s value.”

The detective lit his pipe and slowly inhaled.

“Of course, that also means it’s not so easy to obtain. I had the Division search secondhand bookstores throughout the country for a copy, but they came up empty-handed. The only other option is overseas auction sites. When I looked into it, I found multiple used foreign-book sites that had been tampered with. This ‘program’ detected people who purchased *The Selfish Gene* at a specific time and place and sent them certain other information with the book.”

Ayatsuji glanced at Kubo out of the corner of his eye to gauge his reaction.

“That’s how you ‘adherents to the well’ first learn about Kyougoku. His information, his intentions, and the extent of all the murders he was behind. The book contained either his contact information or knowledge on how to



commit murder; I would have to see the actual book for myself to confirm. Regardless, you adherents must meet some very strict conditions in order to acquire this knowledge. You need the persistence to dirty yourself examining the well, the intellect to figure out the code, and the fervor to spend a few hundred thousand yen on a book—only then do you gain the right to become ‘evil.’ Starting with the botulinum murderer, you’re given the knowledge of how to commit the perfect crime. And that...”

The detective paused his breathing for a second to send Kubo a piercing glare.

*“That’s the real demon lurking in the well.”*

Kubo neither confirmed nor denied the claim. Instead, he simply met the detective’s gaze with a faint grin.

That was when Ayatsuji noticed something and pulled the communicator from earlier out of his pocket.

“Looks like I’ve got a call.” Ayatsuji put in the earbud. “What do you want, Kyougoku?”

He narrowed his eyes, listening carefully and nodding from time to time.

“All right. Sure.”

Suddenly, the automatic brakes started to slow the train down, wheezing over the dark tracks before coming to a full stop.

There was the squeaking of compressed air as the automatic doors opened.

Ayatsuji glanced over at Kubo and growled, “Get off.”

“What about you?” asked Kubo.

“Looks like my train ride continues for a little bit longer. Kyougoku’s waiting for me.”

“I’m out of the loop, huh? Oh, well. Gotta focus on escaping pursuit first.”

“You heard him, Kyougoku,” Ayatsuji muttered into the microphone. “By the way, how does your radio work so deep underground? I know you’re very thorough, but—” He suddenly paused midsentence and frowned. “He hung up.”

“You’re dancing on his palm, too,” Kubo said, grinning. “I enjoyed our little

escape together. Say hi to the man for me.”

But after Kubo hopped out the opened door onto the tracks, Ayatsuji stopped him.

“Let me ask you one more thing.”

Kubo turned around. “Yeah?”

“Why do you think I haven’t killed you?”

The Engineer’s face tensed.

“Surely, you know what my skill does: It makes criminals die in accidents. And you almost certainly murdered Deputy Director Sakashita. If I do a little research, my skill will kill you no matter how far you run. So why do you think I haven’t done that?”

Kubo was now white as a sheet. “What...what are you trying to say?”

“Because you’re not even worth punishing. That’s why.”

Ayatsuji coldly glared down at the man.

“If I prove that Kyougoku is behind your crimes, I can have him die in an ‘accident’ for being your abettor. And I need you alive to do that. In essence, you’re a complete nobody.”

“How dare you!” Kubo furiously shouted as he slammed his fist against the train. “I... I’m different! I’m not a nobody, and I ain’t someone’s puppet! I’m special!”

“Kyougoku once said, ‘The cries of the foolish are music to my ears.’ And for once, I agree with him.” The detective shrugged. “It’s only a matter of time before the Division nabs you. I look forward to seeing you again, Engineer.”

“I will kill you. You can count on that,” Kubo hissed, his eyes flickering murderously. “Only after I make sure I’m safe, though. I need to decide exactly how I’ll make you suffer.”

“Until next time, then.”

“Yeah.” Kubo slowly got off the train, his entire body radiating fury.

“Oh, there’s one thing I forgot to ask. Have you had any hallucinations

recently?” said Ayatsuji. “Any visions you can’t distinguish from reality over the past five years? Of a dog, or a fox...or perhaps a monkey?”

Kubo’s shoulders twitched when he heard the word *monkey*. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he managed to reply.

“Huh... So a monkey, then?” Ayatsuji quietly muttered. “Thanks for the valuable information. You can go now.”

Kubo started to say something, but he soon changed his mind. He glanced at Ayatsuji with disgust before jogging down the tracks.

Once he was far away enough, the train door automatically closed. The locomotive grunted a few times and continued its journey.

\*

“The Engineer’s signal is on the move.”

I was at the military-police investigation headquarters, in a spacious room where numerous agents were going in and out of. In front of me was a monitor connected to a satellite that detected signals emitted by a tracking device.

“Where is he?” Sakaguchi asked as he stared at the screen.

“An emergency subway exit near the harbor.” Asukai tapped the screen. “He probably got off the train and came up to the surface here. That’s when the satellite picked him up.”

“Good thing we put that tracking device on him when we had him,” Sakaguchi replied with a blank expression.

They’d apparently hid a tracking device under one of the lapels of the Engineer’s coat when they shoved him to the ground. It’d been nerve-racking when he first went underground and we lost the signal, but fortunately, we could track him now.

“The harbor, though... He must be attempting to flee by boat.” Sakaguchi grunted. “He’ll be outside satellite coverage on the open sea, so we have to move fast.”

*Let’s do this.*

I wasn’t gonna waste any more time standing there. I pulled my car key out of

my jacket and strode briskly toward the exit.

“Tsujimura.” Sakaguchi suddenly called my name, stopping me in my tracks. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“To capture the suspect, of course!” I answered. “We can’t let him escape! There’s so much I need to get out of him!”

But Sakaguchi didn’t immediately reply. He adjusted his glasses, a blank expression on his face.

“Do you mean as part of your job?” he asked. “Or for your own personal revenge?”

“Of course, it’s...”

But I hesitated before I could even finish.

The mastermind behind Reigo Island. The man who’d dragged my mother to murder...

*“Your mother was eating out of my hand. Want me to show your body how I managed that?”*

“Of course, as my job,” I replied, looking him straight in the eye. “As a member of the Special Division, it’s my duty to capture the deputy director’s killer by any means necessary.”

Sakaguchi observed me in silence for a few moments, his piercing gaze boring a hole right through me.

“...Very well,” he eventually said. “However, I want him back alive. We still need to catch the real mastermind behind all this. I doubt you would let your personal feelings cloud your judgment, but if you kill him, I’ll have to—”

I cut him off. “You can stop there. I swear I will carry out my mission.”

I didn’t wait for Sakaguchi to respond, instead heading straight out the door. I strode to my car without even glancing behind me.

*It’s all right, I told myself. I’ll bring him back alive. I won’t kill him. It’s all right. I’m sure it will be all right.*

After coming to a complete stop, the train heaved a slow sigh like a tired old man.

Ayatsuji stepped out the door and began following the orders being given to him over the radio until he was led to an emergency ladder out of the abandoned underground passage. He promptly opened the iron door leading to the surface, revealing an empty field with no buildings in sight. The train had used a long-abandoned underground route. Ayatsuji could tell he was being watched, but he continued to push forward as instructed.

Before long, he noticed a tarp with a steel underground hatch underneath it. He surveyed his surroundings; there wasn't a soul nearby. It was as silent as a graveyard. While he probably didn't need to worry about being ambushed or surrounded, there wasn't a single general facility that he could secretly use to call for backup. Ayatsuji expected as much, however, so he simply shrugged, then stepped down the hatch.

The narrow underground passage eventually led him to a spacious hollow cavity a dozen yards below the surface—a square room fortified with concrete but otherwise empty. Near the center was yet another hole that led even farther underground. It was closer to a manhole than anything, and he could see a faint light coming from it, sort of like an ominous bonfire.

Ayatsuji peeked into the pit and discovered there was another room below, around thirteen feet from the floor to the ceiling. He'd be able to enter safely by hanging on to the edge of the hole and slowly lowering himself inside. And that's exactly what he did.

“Welcome, Detective. You've had a long journey.”

Hearing that voice made Ayatsuji's entire journey worthwhile.

Standing in the corner of the room was the Sorcerer, practically within spitting distance.

“Kyougoku.”

Kyougoku nodded back with evident satisfaction. “Apologies for dragging you every which way. But that smile of yours made all my efforts worth the trouble.”

Ayatsuji touched his own face. He was smiling...like a beast eyeing its prey.

“How could I not smile? The man of the hour has finally shown himself.”

The detective had fought Kyougoku countless times, but only a handful had been face-to-face. An encounter this rare was worth even more than its weight in gold.

Ayatsuji slowly walked toward Kyougoku, all while carefully observing the room.

It wasn't that big. The room was shaped like a cube, with each side around thirteen feet long. There was hardly anything inside, save for some scraps of metal scattered about. It was like being inside a thirteen-foot-long die. None of Kyougoku's lackeys seemed to be hiding in wait, and there weren't any traps, either.

In other words, nobody was going to disturb their duel.

“Kyougoku.”

“Ayatsuji.”

They faced each other. If either one of them had a dagger, they could slit the other's throat in the blink of an eye.

“Damn.” Ayatsuji slightly tilted his head to the side. “I've waited so long for this day...but now that it's happening, I don't know what to say.”

“I feel the same way.” Kyougoku laughed. “But of course, we both know what needs to be done. Don't we?”

“There are so many things I want to ask you,” the detective said in almost a whisper, “but I know you won't tell me even if I beg.”

“I wouldn't be so sure of that. Try me.”

Ayatsuji stared at the Sorcerer and considered the offer for a few moments. “Then let me ask you this—are you prepared to die?”

The detective's frigid craving for death came almost out of nowhere. The air began to freeze over, nearly burning the man in front of him. Kyougoku was unable to even speak for a brief moment. No one could stand before Ayatsuji's

intense bloodlust without being shaken up a little.

“...My answer is not particularly important,” Kyougoku eventually said. “What’s important is whether we can continue our game here. I brought a little souvenir with me, though it’s rather inelegant.”

The Sorcerer pulled back the collar of his kimono, revealing a sealed pack around his neck with some sort of yellowish liquid inside.

Ayatsuji clicked his tongue. “Tsk. Poison?”

“Nerve gas.” The phantom faintly smirked. “If I was to pull this string, the liquid would fill this entire room with a deadly poison. It smells like fruit, but one sniff sends your entire body into convulsions until you’re no longer able to stand. The muscles you use to breathe are paralyzed within seconds, and you die while spewing the contents of your stomach. But I have absolutely no intention of killing you with this. Think of it as a boorish device to ensure nothing gets in the way of our game.”

“Yeah, betting your own life on a game has always been one of your quirks.” Ayatsuji calmly met Kyougoku’s eyes. “So? What’s the game?”

“A battle of wits,” Kyougoku mirthfully revealed, causing Ayatsuji to quietly knit his brow. “Simple, isn’t it? Several months ago, a certain someone died in this very place in some inexplicable way. If you solve the murder, you win. And if you win...”

Kyougoku paused, shifting his gaze back at Ayatsuji.

“...I will tell you how you can save your partner.”

\*

I didn’t have an answer. I didn’t know what was going to happen. I didn’t even know how I felt.

The uncertainty was incredibly depressing and painful.

I should’ve been glad that I already knew which path to take. I didn’t need to focus on anything else. All I had to do was grit my teeth and move forward.

Now was the time. I stepped on the gas, staring straight at the road ahead.

*Just gun it and catch that man as soon as possible.*

“Tsujimura, you should drive a bit more carefully—”

“Keep your mouth shut, Inspector Asukai. I don’t want you biting your tongue!”

I spun the steering wheel, flying through the light right before it turned red.

We were on a major street in an urban area, heading toward the harbor. My silver Aston Martin sped by numerous cars like a bullet, the red patrol light on the roof flashing.

I continuously switched lanes in a desperate chase to catch the Engineer. I hadn’t even glanced at my speedometer since we left. All the while, Inspector Asukai was bouncing off the passenger seat, groaning.

“Man, what a stupid criminal, huh?!” I shouted to him. “I can’t believe he really thinks he can get away from us! He’s about to get a tough lesson on modesty—that arrogance is going to be his downfall!”

“Ts-Tsujimura! Just wondering—how many car chases have you been in?”

“This is my first one!” I swung the steering wheel, causing the car to drift. “You’re goin’ down, asshole!”

“I’ve never had a more reckless partner in my life!” Asukai wailed.

The car caught air, and the bumper scraped against a telephone pole on the side of the road. Normally, a sound like that would make me worry about repair costs, but now it was just musical accompaniment to the drums and electric guitar playing in my head as we gave chase.

*No way in hell I’m letting him escape!*

“Tsujimura, look!” Asukai pointed up ahead. “That’s his car!”

Far down the intersection was a white sports car—a stolen vehicle with a broken window on the driver’s side; the Engineer had probably shattered it when he stole the car.

I had a good idea of the car’s specs just by looking at it, too. An older urban model, but a high-torque one whose specs rivaled my Aston Martin’s.

*Let’s see what you’re made of.*



Our target noticed us and immediately stepped on the gas, and I did the very same.

“Tsujimura! Red light!”

The transmission roared like a beast as I changed gears, sending my Aston Martin into the intersection like a blazing fireball. I slipped between the cars and trucks until I passed under the red traffic light.

“Ahhhhhh!!”

I caught a glimpse of Asukai clinging to his seat belt.

The white sports car and my silver Aston Martin shot down the road like two streams of blood being pumped furiously out of a heart. Numerous other cars frantically tried to get out of our way, but my eyes were no longer focused on anything except my target. A fire was burning inside me.

*Making me your enemy will be your downfall!*

I shifted into a higher gear, pushing my car to accelerate even more, which created a cloud of smoke under my tires as they rubbed against the road. The silver bullet—my Aston Martin—left black streaks on the asphalt like a never-tiring predator.

My target turned right, so I headed right as well. If I was remembering the map correctly, we should’ve almost been at the harbor. Then we would no longer have to worry about other cars.

“There should be less cars to worry about once we get to the harbor!” I shouted. “Which means I can drive a little more recklessly, right?!”

“This gets worse?!” Asukai cried.

The Engineer’s car and mine almost ran parallel into the harbor’s lot. The roadway here was considerably larger, probably to allow large trucks to pass. On the right was shipping container storage, on the left was a customhouse. Our two cars were racing down the street between them.

All of a sudden...

...I noticed a strange group of people among the containers. There were six men wearing black suits and sunglasses, and they were collecting multiple

duffel bags from people who appeared to be working security at the port. Around them were three SUVs with tinted windows.

The instant the men in black suits noticed the sirens on my car, they started to panic.

“What are they doing...?” I murmured.

The men fled out of sight.

The next moment, my car shook, and it sounded like it was being bludgeoned with hammers.

My heart practically stopped.

“Wh-what was that?!” I shouted.

“This is bad.” Asukai turned pale. “We’re under fire!”

The three black SUVs were now chasing us. One man leaned out the window with a submachine gun.

“Damn it! What’s going on? Did the Engineer call for backup?”

After I looked through my rearview mirror to confirm exactly what kind of cars and guns they were using, I hurriedly searched my mind for the documents I’d memorized...which led me to the worst conclusion possible.

“I can’t believe it,” I groaned.

*So that’s what’s going on.*

The Engineer hadn’t been heading for the harbor for no good reason. He actually had a plan to shake us off here. This place was like a foreign country, one run by inhabitants of the night—a darkness outside the government’s reach.

“They’re the illegal syndicate that runs things here!” I shouted. “What we just saw was a backroom deal going down! That’s the Port Mafia!”

\*

“Tsujimura is under attack?”

Ayatsuji’s words echoed throughout the underground room.

“Precisely,” Kyougoku quietly replied. “I figured I’d devise a little scheme. I

gave Kubo a tip: The Port Mafia was cutting an illicit deal today, and I told him to go interrupt it. I just love those violent mafiosi. They're so predictable."

"So you're saying that they attacked her because they saw a police car pass by during one of their not so wholesome deals?" Ayatsuji snorted with disdain. "That does sound like one of your shallow ideas, Kyougoku. But those men fear authority. They would roll over to appease those in power. If they started randomly attacking police cars, they'd be getting two life sentences a month."

However, Kyougoku was unfazed. His lips curled into a smirk. "Perhaps if this was an ordinary deal, they wouldn't have attacked."

"...What?"

"But what the young Ms. Tsujimura witnessed was an illegal transaction being carried out by low-level members behind their boss's back. Discipline and profit are absolute principles in the Port Mafia, which means that unauthorized transactions are prohibited. Drugs and illegal weapons in particular would attract the government's attention. However...in rare cases, some street-level dealers become blinded by money—this being one of those times."

"A transaction they were keeping secret even from their boss." Ayatsuji clicked his tongue. "They wouldn't just be arrested, then... Anyone who breaks the rules of the underground world are hunted like animals."

"They would most likely be tortured until they began to regret ever being born." Kyougoku mirthfully laughed. "Fear—fear is what moves people to take action, and that is why they would be more than happy to kill a government agent if they had to."

\*

Metal scraps of what was once a storage container flew through the air as bullets passed it by. Each bullet that hit the car sounded like a wind instrument being played out of tune.

"What the hell is going on?! Did all those police crackdowns make the Port Mafia lose their minds?!"

"They're probably trying to keep us from talking because we drove by while they were making some sort of shady deal!" I shouted, quickly turning the

steering wheel. “We’re not going to be able to catch the Engineer if we don’t do something!”

Despite weaving my car to throw their aim off, a few bullets still landed, creating sparks; others hit my back window, leaving a white radial crack. But the glass didn’t shatter.

“This thing’s surprisingly sturdy. Bulletproof glass?” Asukai asked with his gun in hand. “Never expected a rookie government employee to have a car like this.”

“Every agent needs a bulletproof car, even if they have to skip a few meals to pay for one! You know what they say: Better to be a little hungry than shot in the head!”

“Who’s ‘they’?”

“Me!” I shouted, stepping on the gas even harder. “But the undercarriage isn’t bulletproof, so if a bullet ricochets and hits the drivetrain, then the car might flip over!”

“Let’s pray that doesn’t happen!”

Asukai stuck his arm out the window and began shooting at the SUV behind us.

After a few bullets hit the enemy’s vehicle, they briefly slowed down, so I turned the steering wheel sharply to the right. My car screeched, the left tires almost lifting off the ground, until Asukai used his body weight to bring us back down. Stacks of cardboard boxes flew into the air, and iron rods littered the asphalt.

Slipping in between warehouses, I sped down the narrow path so quickly that everything I passed was merely a blur. The engine roared as loudly as it could.

“They’re still on our tail!” Asukai shouted, looking behind us. “They clearly don’t plan on letting us get away!”

I swung the car to the left and continued to race through the warehouse district.

The situation was dire. We had three SUVs chasing after us, and they had

submachine guns. It didn't help that they were used to fighting like this, either. To make matters worse, this harbor was basically their home; they probably knew every path like the back of their hand. Meanwhile, we just had pistols, and I couldn't even control my skill.

*What are we gonna do? They're going to catch up with us at this rate.*

My hands, gripping the steering wheel, were dripping with sweat.

*Think, Mizuki.*

If only I had Detective Ayatsuji's help like when we'd been surrounded by that special task force...

\*

"Hurry up and give me the test," Ayatsuji dryly demanded.

"Oh? Are you sure you wish to accept the challenge?" Kyougoku asked in an amused manner.

"Stop playing around. You're wasting my time," the detective spat. "If this is all part of your scheme, then there's one thing that's clear. You're not going to use a gun, or poison, or physical violence to kill me. You want to defeat me in one of your games. You want me to surrender so you can take control of my life, and only then will you try to kill me. In other words, nothing has changed. Now give me that test."

"You truly are one of a kind." Kyougoku smirked with evident satisfaction. "Everything you need is right there. I call this unsolved case the 'Murderer's Box.' It's a personal favorite of mine."

After the detective picked up the stack of papers lying in the corner of the room, he looked at the type on the cover and realized that these were clearly files stolen from the city police. Ayatsuji began flipping through the pages.

A murder had occurred in this room.

The murderer was a corrupt con man who embezzled money from an accountant at a major company. However, three months prior, he found himself in danger. The accountant became overwhelmed with guilt and ran away. If she went to the police, he'd be done for, so the con man desperately began searching for this accountant.

And before long, he found her.

She'd been right where Ayatsuji was standing in this underground shelter. The con man killed her, but he somehow ended up getting off scot-free.

Ayatsuji continued flipping through the pages.

Why was the murderer found innocent? Because it'd been deemed impossible for him to have committed the crime.

The accountant was stabbed to death in this room. The con man didn't have an alibi for when she was killed, and they even found a coat with blood on it at his home. The blood, of course, matched the accountant's.

However, nobody could have killed her because there was no escaping this room. It had a one-way entrance.

Once the accountant ran into this shelter, she destroyed the metal ladder—the only way in and out. In other words, this was an improbable crime. Even if someone killed her inside the shelter, they wouldn't be able to escape.

In the end, the con man was found not guilty due to insufficient evidence.

"So he and I are in the same boat." Ayatsuji gently shook his head. "I won't be able to escape if I don't solve the puzzle."

He looked up at the ceiling. The round hole he'd come in through was thirteen feet overhead in the center of the room. The entire room was empty—no clues, no footholds to climb. Even if he wanted to call for help, his phone wouldn't get a signal this far underground.

"By the way, there was no evidence of him bringing a hook or rope ladder to the scene of the crime." Kyougoku grinned with delight. "He found himself in the same situation you're in now. Only after he came down here and killed the woman did he finally realize that he couldn't leave."

"Interesting. Now it makes sense. Put simply, this is yet another case you had a hand in, which was why he was able to pull it off," Ayatsuji said. "You told the murderer how to escape this bunker. After all, you wouldn't be here right now if you didn't know how to get out."

Kyougoku looked calm. "I believe you've already gotten enough outside help.

Hearing the game master narrate his life story would suck all the fun out of the game, would it not?"

"Good point." Ayatsuji went back to surveying the room.

The walls were made of a white resin-based plywood, so the con man could have broken them with a hammer or something. But the walls looked intact, and breaking them wouldn't have helped him escape an underground room.

Each side of the cube-shaped room was thirteen feet long. The floor, ceiling, and walls were all square. It was like being inside a thirteen-foot-tall die. That must have been why Kyougoku called this room a box.

There was nothing that could be used as a step...because the room was almost empty. In one corner were the remains of the iron pipes that had been part of the metal ladder the victim broke. They'd probably once been partially buried in a hole in the ceiling to connect the room to the exit, but now all that remained were dozens of metal scraps.

According to the case files, the victim felt her life was in danger, so she contacted the police before coming here to hide. She knew she wouldn't be able to escape this shelter without their help, which was evidence of how desperate and serious she was.

However, by the time the police arrived, she was already dead.

*A body.*

"There's no body," Ayatsuji noted. "If she was stabbed to death, then there should be bloodstains somewhere."

"Allow me to show you," Kyougoku said, beckoning the detective over.

Hidden on one side of the room was an ordinary door that led to an even smaller room when pushed. If the original room was a thirteen-foot-tall die, then this one had to be a roughly ten-foot-tall die.

Both rooms were almost exactly the same, with the only difference being the obvious bloodstain on the floor in the smaller room. The coagulated blood was the one unique feature of this simple, lifeless place, and what an intense, vivid feature it was. The neighboring room must have been jealous.

Surrounding the bloodstain were pieces of iron pipe—remnants of the metal ladder—stuck in the floor. The five pieces outlined how the victim’s body was found, similar to white crime scene chalk. The longer ones were around sixteen inches, while the shorter ones were not even six.

Ayatsuji crouched before the bloodstain and observed the metal. “Why are there pieces of pipe stuck in the floor?”

He returned to the larger room and began to observe the partition.

The door was well-built. There were also four black lines drawn in a square on the wall, as if to indicate the size of the smaller room. The door was in the center of the wall, as was the black square, which was larger than the door. Above the square was a dark cavity.

“So there’s a hole up here?”

The detective reached for the cavity to no avail. It didn’t look like jumping would help, either. If someone as tall as Ayatsuji couldn’t reach it, then the criminal wouldn’t have been able to escape this way. All Ayatsuji could see in the dark cavity were the metal reinforcement rods used to connect the walls and ceiling in the smaller room—the framework. But he couldn’t easily jump up and grab them.

Even if he did manage to pull himself up to the cavity, there wasn’t anything else he could do. It was about seven feet from the cavity to the hole in the center of the big room; not even the greatest escape artist of the century would be able to clear that jump.

Ayatsuji returned to the center of the big room and gazed at the exit above once more.

“The exit’s around thirteen feet high,” he observed. “A professional athlete’s vertical jump is said to be around twenty to twenty-eight inches, so the highest the suspect described in the files could get would be roughly eight feet and two inches. There’s no way he’d be able to reach a thirteen-foot ceiling.”

“That is correct. Now, I believe it’s about time you give me your solution.” Kyougoku faintly smirked.

Ayatsuji scrutinized the Sorcerer. “I don’t remember hearing about a time



limit.”

“Don’t tell me that the great Homicide Detective is intimidated by a little time limit?”

The detective clenched his jaw. He couldn’t possibly argue with that...but he still didn’t have nearly enough information.

\*

The Aston Martin’s body bounced as the car sped almost out of control down the harbor, hitting numerous empty shipping crates along the way.

We were gradually closing the distance between us and the Engineer, but I had no idea just how much longer my vehicle was going to last. Since this was the Port Mafia’s turf, it’d probably take a while for military-police reinforcements and the coast guard to arrive.

“Damn it! I’m out of ammo!” Asukai shouted while staring at his locked-back pistol.

“Take my gun!”

*Not like I’m in any position to use it.*

“Even their vehicles are bulletproof!” Asukai yelled. “They have more firepower, too. I don’t know how much longer this car’s going to last...”

By the time I realized it, we were on a seaside path near the embankment. Our enemy really did know these streets like the back of their hand. They were going to corner us at the end of the path against the edge.

*This isn’t good.*

“Tsujimura!” Asukai pointed ahead. “That’s his car! It’s on that ship!”

When I shifted my gaze, I noticed a cargo ship at the wharf. The Engineer’s white sports car was parked on the deck. It looked like he was going to try to use that ship to escape.

“I’m taking us to that ship!” I turned the steering wheel. “Besides, it’s not like we’ve got anywhere else we can go!”

My Aston Martin careened so hard to the right that the bottom of the vehicle scratched against the asphalt. Our destination now was the wharf.

*There's no way I'm letting the Engineer get away with this.*

He claimed he'd manipulated my mother, and if that was true, then maybe she wasn't inherently evil. Maybe he'd coaxed her into doing those terrible things.

I hated my mother when I was younger. When I got older, she basically became a stranger who was always working and rarely came home. But to my surprise, I still blamed the Engineer for her death, and I still wanted to hurt him.

*I'm going to catch him, no matter what, and once I get my hands on him...*

The car soared toward the bridge like a bullet. It was a large one-lane drawbridge that opened at the center to let ships enter the bay. However, there were numerous crates stacked in the middle, blocking our path. The workers had probably been loading them onto the ship when they heard gunfire and ran away. The bridge was narrow—I couldn't drive around the crates.

"I'm charging through those boxes!" I shouted.

"Are you sure about this?!" Asukai shouted back. "What if someone's hiding behind them?! You'll run them over!"

I was momentarily speechless.

There he was, right in front of me. My mother's murderer.

"Well, we don't have much of a choice now! We'll just have to pray that nobody's there!" I gripped the steering wheel. "Hold on tight!"

I charged right into the stacked boxes.

The car shook. Radishes, sponges, toilet paper, fruit—countless commodities flew into the air before falling into the ocean. My Aston Martin bounced from the impact and tore across the drawbridge.

"No one was in those boxes after all!" I shouted, my foot still on the gas pedal.

"Owww, my hip!" Asukai's voice was trembling.

It felt like we'd run over a lot of products, but not any people, so I was relieved. It'd be next to impossible for anyone not to notice a roaring car

speeding toward the bridge and being shot at.

“I’m driving up that ramp!”

Turning the steering wheel, I changed course for the transport ship.

All of a sudden, something came flying through the air from the opposite shore.

Everything began to shake. Something had exploded right before it could collide with the car, swallowing the vehicle in orange flames as it was thrown into the air.

“Gah...!”

Everything turned white; my body hurtled through the car until I had no idea which way was up and which way was down. The airbag deployed, smashing my nose in and knocking me out.

I saw meaningless images within the darkness. My mother gazing into the distance. Me at target practice at the Division. The Ayatsuji Detective Agency’s dim interior. After that, I started to see memories of my childhood that I had long forgotten.

And for a moment, I’d even forgotten where I was and what I was doing.

“Hey! Wake up! We’re still under enemy fire!”

When I came to, Asukai was yelling and shaking my arm.

The car was stopped by the wharf; smoke and fire had started to sneak inside. I’d regained consciousness just as Asukai was dragging me out of the car.

I crawled onto the ground and hid behind what was left of my Aston Martin. Countless bullets came flying from the opposite shore and struck my car; the resulting noise sounded like a brass instrument.

“Those assholes hit us with an airburst launcher!” Asukai shouted from behind the car, shielding himself from the gunfire. “What kind of weapons-smuggling operation is the Port Mafia involved in?!”

Airburst launchers were a relatively new type of firearm capable of launching high-speed grenades. They came equipped with a laser range finder, which

calculated the distance to the target and automatically detonated the grenade right by them. This was 100 percent a military weapon used in heavily armed warfare, not something that gangs should be blasting willy-nilly in a residential area.

This must have been what they'd been purchasing earlier when I witnessed their illegal transaction...which also meant that they weren't going to let us get out of here alive, no matter what.

"Tsuji-mura, how many bullets do you have left?" Asukai asked from behind the car.

I checked my pistol. "Just a few."

"All right... I have some good news, though." Asukai looked toward the bridge. "It's about time for the drawbridge to rise. They won't be able to follow us after that."

I glanced in the same direction. He was right. The bridge was starting to split down the middle—where I'd hit all that cargo—and rise. At the very least, the enemy would no longer be able to drive after us.

"That is good news," I replied. "Now that they can't catch up to us, they'll just have to keep shooting from the shore while we sit here with nowhere to run or hide. Things can't get any better."

"You can say that again."

The car wasn't going to be able to take another hit from an airburst launcher. If some of them went around the bridge to attack us, then we'd be done for. Once the drawbridge lowered to its original position, they'd simply corner us.

*Am I going to die here?*

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched the crates of products fall into the opening of the rising bridge. Fruits, vegetables, and even heavy wooden boxes hit the water, creating splash after splash.

*Guess this means I won't have to pay for all the stuff I ran over,* I thought in passing.

Ever since I became an agent, I'd pictured myself dying in a gunfight more

times than I could count. I'd imagined dying in a shoot-out, just like in the movies. I'd imagined myself writhing in pain in a filthy back alley before perishing. I had gone through the scenario so many times that the bullets and looming death still didn't feel real right now.

Was I really going to die? Was I really going to be nothing more than some enemy's target practice and perish without even using my skill? Was that how my life was going to end?

The man responsible for my mother's death was so close, and yet...

I grabbed my gun, quickly stuck my arm out from behind the car, and fired. A mafioso on the other side of the water flew back and hit the ground.

*I'm an agent. This is no different than an action-packed film scene. Like hell I'm gonna let this scare me.*

I immediately saw a different man preparing to fire an airburst launcher.

"Tsuji-mura! Another grenade incoming!"

I didn't even blink. I kept my gaze and my pistol pointed forward.

"I'm shooting it down," I told Asukai.

"Are you out of your mind? You, hit a 25mm grenade going over four hundred miles per hour? With that tiny pistol?!"

"I won't know until I try."

I had my gun aimed right at the enemy.

If I could hit the grenade the instant it launched, I'd blow up the remaining rounds in the magazine and take out the entire group. I didn't have any other option.

The enemy aimed the launcher at us.

*It's okay. This is no different from training. Just maintain good form and hit the nonmoving target. I wouldn't be doubting myself if this was training.*

The enemy peeked into his laser range finder.

*Not yet. It's too soon,* I told myself.

The sea breeze suddenly died down, giving a brief millisecond of silence.

*Now!*

I pulled the trigger.

.....

Nothing happened.

My stomach began to twist into knots.

*My gun's jammed!*

The blast from earlier must have gotten some dirt in the chamber, and now the slide was stuck.

*Why did something like this have to happen at a time like this?!*

It was almost strange how clearly I could see the enemy start to pull the launcher's trigger.

*It's over.*

*This is the end.*

But the end never came.

I'd shut my eyes and clenched my teeth, yet there was no blast wave or impact.

I slowly opened my eyes and noticed that the mafia members were shouting on the other side of the water. They weren't even looking this way.

*What the...? What's going on?*

One man had a cell phone to his ear and was talking into it, his face white as a sheet. He then immediately turned around in a panic and began furiously giving orders to the others; they all yelled and ran back to their SUVs.

And just like that, they were gone. They hadn't even glanced in our direction.

Asukai slowly peeked out from behind the car. "We're...alive?"

"They fled..., " I muttered as I lowered my gun.

"Must've been an urgent order from their boss," Asukai added. "But still, why

would they just leave? They could've cooked us if they stayed a few more seconds."

This sudden retreat—it was all too convenient, something that never happened in our line of work without reason. That is, unless someone was watching out for us from behind the scenes.

And only one person could do a thing like that.

"It's obvious why," I insisted. "Detective Ayatsuji foiled the enemy's plan."

\*

"It's a simple but creative escape trick," Ayatsuji explained, leisurely walking in front of Kyougoku. "The exit is thirteen feet from the ground. There's no staircase. Not even a relatively tall man could reach any higher than eight feet if he was lucky, so how was he going to reach something another eight away?"

Ayatsuji crossed the room, then placed a hand on the door to the smaller room.

"If this was any ordinary locked-room murder case, I would start with searching for inconsistencies. A pointless double-layered door, an unnecessary spare key, an inaccessible basement—each one of these added components would be crossed off the list. On the other hand, the barer a room is, the fewer clues there are to find. In this bunker, there is almost no foreign matter. We have a room and blood. That's it. So what then? Well, if nothing looks to be out of place, then you'll just have to make something look out of place yourself."

"Oh?" Kyougoku, who had remained silent the entire time, suddenly smirked faintly.

*"There's a room inside this locked room. That's what's off about it,"* Ayatsuji declared, pushing the door and peeking into the smaller room in the back. "This larger room is a cube with a thirteen-foot-high ceiling, while the smaller room is a little under ten feet high. Now, if we use the Pythagorean theorem when each side of the cube is just under ten feet, then the hypotenuse is around thirteen feet, which is also the height of the larger room. And that...allows you to do this."

The detective opened the door, grabbed the top of the frame, and pulled as

hard as he could.

The smaller room tilted to one side.

“If there’s nothing to stand on, but you have another room, then all you have to do is stand on that room.”

Ayatsuji put even more muscle into it, using the black lines on the wall as a guide to tilt the smaller room forward. He then adjusted the height and carefully moved back.

“What appeared to be black lines were the room’s joints. The cavity provides space to rotate the smaller room. The floor above this shelter has an even larger cavity, so if this floor was built the same, then there would be extra space, and that extra space became the cavity you see here. It was just as you said when I first got here. This smaller room was not only a room but a box as well.”

The smaller room, which had been pushed diagonally on its side, stopped at a forty-five-degree angle with its top edge sticking out.

“And now we have something to stand on,” Ayatsuji continued. “The newly created slanted step is around seven feet tall, which is already halfway to the exit directly above, allowing you to easily reach it.”

He tapped the slanted corner, which was slightly towering over him. On the corner was the metal framework of the room; anyone could easily jump off it without slipping.

“Impressive, Ayatsuji. I truly wish I could congratulate you.” Kyougoku narrowed his eyes, which held a sparkle deep inside. “But surely, I don’t have to explain to you that your solution is incomplete, right? There’s more to the trick. Go on.”

Ayatsuji slapped the outer walls of the slanted smaller room. “If the room was slanted like this when the police arrived, it wouldn’t have been a locked-room case. Anyone would’ve seen how the murderer escaped, which is why the slanted room needed to be returned to normal... That wouldn’t be particularly difficult, though.”

After the detective lowered his head and walked through the door, he used



his body weight to slowly start pushing the room back to where it'd originally been.

"This is why the victim's body was found in the smaller room, surrounded by pieces of pipe."

As Ayatsuji stood where the body once lay, the room slowly leveled itself to its original position.

"The iron pipes were stuck in the floor to keep the body from moving. After the criminal escaped, the weight of the corpse shifted the room back to normal."

Ayatsuji left the smaller room and stood in front of Kyougoku.

"This is the trick he used to escape the so-called unescapable room."

"Marvelous." Kyougoku clapped with delight. "To think you solved the case in such a short amount of time... The 'Murderer's Box' was truly a favorite of mine..."

The detective scowled in disgust. "Hmph. If only I could find evidence that you were directly involved, then an 'accident' could take care of you permanently for me..."

Ayatsuji looked around the room. The murderer was probably no different than the others. He'd decided to kill the victim on his own, and he chose how he was going to kill her as well. All Kyougoku did was set the stage for the "Murderer's Box," which meant that he wasn't an accomplice to the murder nor a target for Ayatsuji's skill.

Ayatsuji had been in this situation many times before. There was no way Kyougoku would ever make a mistake.

"Now for your end of the bargain. Tell me how to save Tsujimura."

"Oh my. I'm getting jealous." Kyougoku took a piece of paper out of his pocket. "This is the contact information of the men attacking your assistant right now. Someone of your caliber should have no trouble stopping them with this information alone, yes?"

Ayatsuji memorized the number on the paper instantly, then whipped out the

phone in his pocket.

“There’s no signal here. I’m heading back to the surface.” He turned away from the phantom. “I’ll deal with you after that. Prepare yourself.”

“Show a little more kindness to your elders, Detective.”

“Shut your mouth.”

Ayatsuji tipped the smaller room on its side, then nimbly pulled himself through the hole in the ceiling.

“Ayatsuji,” Kyougoku called while Ayatsuji was making his way through the exit. “Let me give you a word of advice.”

“What?”

“Even if you save your assistant, you’ve already lost. You will never get another shot at victory. Do not forget that.”

The detective ruminated on those words for a few moments.

“I don’t want another shot at victory,” he said. “All I want is to see you die.” He began to climb toward the exit before adding, “I’ll be back soon. Be ready for me.”

Cell phone in hand, he rushed down the one-way underground passage while staring at the screen, searching for an area where he could get a signal.

Only after reaching the halfway point of the passage did it finally happen. Ayatsuji inputted the phone number and was promptly connected to the Port Mafia attackers.

“The Division knows what you’re doing, and Sakaguchi has your boss on speed dial. If you do not stop the attack this instant, the Division will have no choice but to inform your boss of your disloyalty, and the Port Mafia’s commando unit will hunt you down until every last one of you is ripped to shreds. So back down now if you don’t want that to happen.”

Ayatsuji hung up without waiting for a reply.

The Port Mafia grunts no longer had any reason to kill Tsujimura or Asukai. The only thing those two had to worry about was running away.

“Now, then...”

The detective shook his head a few times, then started returning to the sealed room.

All that was left was Kyougoku.

The detective had already come up with a few measures to handle the nerve gas. Although Ayatsuji was more of an intellectual, he still had the physical strength to incapacitate an elderly man. The only reason why he hadn't done that earlier was because he'd been prioritizing Tsujimura's safety and had to play along with the phantom's game. But the game was over. He could break every bone in that feeble man's body, and the Division could come handle the rest once they got Ayatsuji's coordinates. All the detective had to do was keep Kyougoku from escaping until then.

Ayatsuji ran back down the one-way passage and returned to the underground shelter.

But Kyougoku was gone.

“...?!”

The detective grunted in shock.

He had just proven that the only escape route was the hole in the ceiling, and the underground passageway after that was undoubtedly a one-way path. There was neither nook nor cranny that Kyougoku could have used to hide while Ayatsuji was out. Plus, if there was even something vaguely off, Ayatsuji would have noticed.

The detective checked every inch of the two rooms and all their crevices, but Kyougoku was nowhere to be found. On the other side of the cavity were concrete walls, and unless there was a third room, then there was no secret passage, either. Ayatsuji found himself in the exact same situation he'd just been in.

In fact, this was even worse because he had far fewer clues.

*A disappearing act.*

Ayatsuji groaned. So this was the real mystery that had to be solved.

Tilting the smaller room allowed him to reach the exit. There was absolutely no other way to leave this underground bunker. Nevertheless, Kyougoku seemed to have disappeared like smoke, without breaking any walls or getting help.

In closed-off rooms, the simpler the problem seemed, the more difficult it was to solve. But even with that being said, this bizarre simplicity went beyond what could be possibly solved.

Ayatsuji stood motionlessly in the center of the room.

*What was the last thing Kyougoku said?*

*“Even if you save your assistant, you’ve already lost.”*

Kyougoku was going to get away if the detective didn’t solve this mystery, and he was going to lose the opportunity of a lifetime.

Ayatsuji continued to stand absolutely still, like a statue, in the center of the room.

After some time went by, his furious shouting and the sound of his fist hitting the wall echoed down the underground passage.

\*

Asukai and I rushed inside the cargo ship.

The military police had barred it from leaving the port. There was nowhere for the Engineer to run now.

The cargo ship was divided into three floors. The bottom floor was for loading trailers, the middle for commercial vehicles, and the top for cargo. It was highly unlikely that the Engineer was still in the sports car, so Asukai and I split up to search each floor. I had my pistol; Asukai was carrying an emergency breaching hatchet, since he’d run out of bullets.

The top floor was extremely spacious, with hardly anyone working on it in order to keep transportation costs down. Therefore, it was eerily quiet. I could hear a car slowly moving on another floor somewhere, but it was so far away that I could hardly make out much more than that.

My pistol drawn, I carefully moved forward.

The enemy couldn't have picked a worse location.

There was an ungodly number of hiding spots here: behind stacked crates, in the shadows of a yellow forklift, inside countless boxes big enough to fit a single person. If this were a movie, then this would be where the villain tried to ambush the secret-agent main character from behind. I didn't want to pursue the Engineer in a place like this.

I aligned my pistol with my sight while continuing farther into the maze.

Then I suddenly heard a rubber shoe squeaking against the floor. Alarm bells went off in my head: *red alert*.

"Who's there?!" I shouted, pointing my gun. "Show yourself!"

A black shadow moved on the other side of the crate near the wall. It looked as if someone was trying to run away in a panic.

"Stop! Stop, or I'll shoot!"

The flustered individual was so startled that they tripped and fell on their face and pathetically groaned. "Okay, okay. Ya got me. I'm sorry. I'll tell ya whatever ya want. Just don't shoot. Please—I'm begging ya."

Panicking on the floor was a small middle-aged man in a navy collared shirt.

It wasn't the Engineer. A deckhand, maybe?

*Wait a sec—*

"That golf bag—that's the Engineer's, isn't it?" I motioned to the black golf bag with my gun.

"Th-thi-thi-this is just—!" The man tried hiding the bag behind his back, only to fall over again.

"Where's that bag's owner?"

"I, uh...I can't say." He frantically shook his head, white as a sheet.

I brought my gun closer.

"O-okay! You win! I'll talk! Just get that thing away from me!"

He was like a small, trembling child.

*This guy's...a real piece of work.*

The man pushed the bag forward with his shaking arms. “The fella on the run—it’s his. After he drove onto the ship, he handed me this here bag and hid in his designated spot. Told me to throw it in the ocean. It wasn’t part of the deal, but he seemed desperate, so—”

“Wait. Hold on.” I held out my hand to stop him. “This person ‘on the run’—you mean the Engineer? And what do you mean, ‘his designated spot’—?”

“Well, that’s what smugglers do, right?”

“Who’s the smuggler?”

“Me!” The man grinned.

All the strength in my pistol hand gave out. So much for feeling like the main character in a movie.

“The police already blocked this ship from leaving,” I said as I lowered my gun. “The Engineer you’re trying to smuggle out of here can no longer escape, so tell me where he is.”

Some smugglers helped clients flee the country via illegal means. They provided passports and assistance for these clients’ new lives at their destination. It was a relatively popular underground profession nowadays in this bizarre era of skill-related crime. Some smuggled dangerous goods on the side as well, and those people were often heavily armed. This guy didn’t seem to have a weapon on him, which meant that smuggling people must’ve been his sole specialty.

After pressuring him to answer, the man told me that the Engineer was “over yonder” and began to walk ahead on trembling legs.

The more he walked, the more his lips loosened. He seemed to be gradually gaining confidence.

“After I had him leave the car, I got him to hide among the cargo. It’s easy to find people in large containers and trailers, so I usually have folks hide with the precision machines and food. ’Cause if you break open one of those crates, the product might get ruined, and whoever opened it’ll have to pay for damages.

Even the police save crates like those for last. Just in case, I also give the crates false bottoms and have folks lie under that. Kinda like the salted salmon ya buy in those special boxes. Know what I mean? Ever bought salmon like that?"

I didn't reply.

"Anyway, the fella I'm helping escape is in that there crate..." He confidently pointed at a pile of cargo. "Hmm?"

"What's wrong?" I asked.

The man suddenly looked around in bewilderment.

"It's gone," he squeaked.

"What...?"

"It was the third one from the top. Crate number fifty-eight. Strange... I coulda sworn it was right here. Crates fifty-seven and fifty-nine are here, too. Only fifty-eight's gone. Maybe he got spirited away?"

"Yeah, right... He probably heard the commotion and took off."

"But the whole crate is gone. If he thought he was in danger, why take the crate with him? Those things weigh a ton."

He had a point. These wooden crates were big enough for a single person to comfortably lie down in. Not only were they heavy, they were too big to carry by hand. Also, crate fifty-seven was neatly stacked over crate fifty-nine with no signs of having fallen over. Even if the Engineer heard our gunfight with the Port Mafia, would he really have had the time to neatly stack the crate that was on top of his before running away?

My cell phone rang, so I pulled it out to see who was calling: Sakaguchi.

"Tsujimura speaking. Sakaguchi, the Engineer—"

*"Tsujimura, don't worry about him. I need you back here. An MP investigator already found the Engineer."*

"What?!"

I squeezed the phone in surprise.

*They found him? But he was supposed to be on this ship. He was supposed to*

*be trying to sneak out of the country...*

“They caught him?!”

“Yes.” A few seconds of silence followed, as if Sakaguchi was thinking about something. *“Tsujimura, please relay Detective Ayatsuji’s next order. He needs to unravel what happened to the Engineer.”*

“‘What happened’...? I thought you found him—?”

But that was when it hit me. I finally realized why Sakaguchi needed Detective Ayatsuji’s help.

*“When we found the Engineer, he was already dead.”*

\*

There was a door in front of me. A rugged, cast-iron door—black, heavy, and small with neither a decoration nor even a handle to open it. It was as if once it was closed, it could never be opened again.

And that door was closed, never to be opened again. The truth on the other side was sealed off from me forevermore.

I gently opened my eyes, and the door, burned onto the back of my eyelids, disappeared. The iron door didn’t exist in reality but in my mind. But even then, *that door was closed*. Nobody would ever see what was on the other side.

When I opened my eyes, I saw a dead body washed up on the shore.

It was a small beach not so far from the Port Mafia’s turf. A body was lying on the gray sand, like a filthy bag of trash that had washed ashore, with numerous agents and crime-lab experts crowding around it.

Every single one of them was focused and taking their work extremely seriously. No surprise there; this wasn’t some unidentified, unfortunate soul. It was the serial killer who’d murdered the deputy director, and the criminal whom both the military police and the Special Division had been doing everything in their power to catch. It was the Engineer.

Standing closest to the corpse was Sakaguchi. His expression was blank, and he was staring at the Engineer’s body as if it were an old can littering the beach.

“Too much time has passed since he died. The body is heavily damaged as



well,” Sakaguchi noted with a brief glance in my direction. “Even the Division is going to have trouble retrieving any information that forensics can’t already get.”

He wasn’t joking. The corpse was mangled in such a bizarre way. In fact, I couldn’t even say with confidence that this was actually the Engineer. His entire body was battered and bruised as if he’d been beaten with something heavy, and he probably didn’t have a single intact bone left. Furthermore, he had so many cuts that his skin was peeled almost completely off. Whatever attacked him must have been powerful.

Before long, forensics confirmed that the fingerprints in the white sports car matched the ones Kubo left at the train station.

*Kubo* was apparently the Engineer’s real name.

At any rate, this meant that he was, without a doubt, the Engineer. The man who’d driven my mother to murder, the only one who knew her.

And now he was gone.

How was I supposed to feel?

A nearby fisherman happened to find the body washed ashore earlier that day. Although we still needed to wait for an autopsy for a more accurate time of death, the rigor mortis in his jaw muscles, alongside the postmortem lividity, suggested that he’d died just two to three hours earlier—around when I was in a gunfight with the Port Mafia.

In other words, the Engineer—Kubo—was killed right after boarding the ship.

After a few moments of thought, I said, “Whoever killed the Engineer—Kubo—in such a short amount of time had to have known about his escape plan. In other words, it has to be someone who was involved in Kyougoku’s plot to kill the deputy director.”

“Or perhaps even Kyougoku himself. Kubo was most likely no more than a pawn to Kyougoku.” Sakaguchi nodded. “Tsujimura.”

“Yes?”

“As I told you already, this case is the Special Division’s top priority. We can’t

afford to lose to the Ministry of Justice in this struggle for power, which means we have to find the criminal truly responsible for the deputy director's death at all costs and prove that they are guilty. And to do that, we need to use a certain skill to bring the absolute truth to light, since nowadays, physical evidence and confessions can be faked. Do you understand what I'm getting at?"

I nodded.

"We have to assume that whoever killed Kubo was using him," Sakaguchi added. "Namely, the mastermind behind the deputy director's murder. It's extremely likely that Kyougoku is behind all this, but we still can't say for sure that it was him. Regardless, we don't necessarily even need to."

"We don't?" I asked, somewhat surprised.

"What's important is proving that the Division wasn't behind the deputy director's murder. Right now, the only person who can do that is Detective Ayatsuji."

*So that's what's going on.*

"I'm going to ask Detective Ayatsuji to kill whoever did this to Kubo," he flat out admitted. "His skill is completely different from anyone else's. It activates solely based on absolute truth. Put simply, it's not going to activate from an incorrect answer, so being fooled by someone pretending to be the criminal or an error in his reasoning won't get anyone killed. His skill only eliminates the real criminal; it is absolute proof of their crime."

*An omnipotent skill.*

Most skills were subjective, but Detective Ayatsuji's was different. His skill was objective; it only granted death to people who truly committed a crime. In other words, it completely eliminated the possibility of a false charge or accusation. The reason why his skill was feared and considered dangerous was because it was extremely rare; it administered absolute truth and justice in this uncertain world.

And that was why the Division hired him for work, despite understanding just how dangerous his skill was.

"This is an order of the highest priority," Sakaguchi stated. "If he refuses, fails,

or is unable to solve the case within the time given to him, then he will be dealt with as a Special A-Grade Dangerous Skill User. Make sure you remind the detective of that when you talk to him.”

Dealt with as a Special A-Grade Dangerous Skill User. In other words—*eliminated*.

“Don’t worry,” I replied. “I heard Detective Ayatsuji just defeated Kyougoku in a battle of wits. I’m sure he’ll be able to find the truth behind the Engineer’s murder, too.”

*Yeah, it’s gonna be okay*, I told myself.

There wasn’t a case that this detective—this shameless, cold, arrogant detective—couldn’t solve.

There was nothing he couldn’t solve.

\*

Ayatsuji stood in a daze.

He could hear nothing except the roaring waterfall. All he could see was the pale mist that rose like a mirage.

This was the basin of the waterfall.

The spot where Ayatsuji and Kyougoku had settled their score—the site of Kyougoku’s fall. The detective simply stood there in a daze.

He was in search of an exit.

An end to this puzzle.

An escape from this trap.

He stepped into the basin, unconcerned that his knees were getting wet, and the cold water weighed down his clothes, slowly robbing his body of its warmth.

It was a waste of time. There was no exit, and there certainly was no solution.

The path of escape had been sealed.

*“You cannot defeat me, my dear bloodthirsty detective. This battle was doomed to fail.”*

“So that’s...what he meant,” Ayatsuji said to himself.

He was ghastly pale—his skin, his lips. It was almost as if his frigid thirst for blood, which had sent chills down the spines of countless criminals, was turning on him.

“That’s...what you meant, Kyougoku.”

Ayatsuji took another step deeper into the waterfall basin—another step closer to the source of the mist.

This, too, was a locked-room mystery—Kyougoku’s ultimate scheme. It was a sinister chamber that one could enter but not leave.

The detective shoved his arm into the water, and it splashed over his entire body. He felt around the bottom of the basin until he eventually found what he was searching for, pulled it out, and held it up to the dim sunlight. It was a dull copper coin.

“I’ve solved the mystery,” the detective muttered to himself. “I know how you did it, and I know what you’re scheming. I’ve figured it all out, Kyougoku.”

The words spewed out of his mouth as if he was vomiting blood.

He had solved all the mysteries.

How Kyougoku survived the fall from the top of the waterfall. Why his skill didn’t kill Kyougoku. The well. Why Kyougoku used the Engineer. Kyougoku’s escape from the underground box.

“So that’s how you did it, Kyougoku? That’s what you meant by doomed to fail.”

*“You’ve already lost.”*

Kyougoku’s smile and what he truly meant when he said those words...

Ayatsuji gazed into the sky. It seemed so distant; the mist dulled the sunlight, making everything look like it was underwater.

“You were right, Kyougoku,” he softly wheezed, quietly closing his eyes. He didn’t sound like a predatory snake, but rather, a mouse. “I.....lost.”

\*

Asukai was sitting at his desk, silently lost in thought and not even touching the pickled vegetables waiting for him. Everything was as busy as always.

Thanks to the shoot-out at the port and the Engineer's death, there were countless tasks that needed to be dealt with.

All of a sudden, the phone rang, so Asukai shifted his gaze toward it. *What could it be?* he wondered. He didn't recognize this ring. It sounded different when there was a murder or a burglary. Asukai was skilled in predicting what kind of phone call it was simply by listening to how the phone rang, and yet he had no idea what this could have been about. He had never heard anything like this before.

After listening to it ring three times, he gave up trying to guess and answered. However, saying he was taken aback by who it was on the other end of the line would have been an understatement.

"...Detective Ayatsuji?" Asukai brought the phone closer to his ear. "Yes. Huh? A list of hospital patients in critical condition from traffic accidents...? Well, sure, I can absolutely get you that, but..."

\*

Flesh was being hacked apart at the Ayatsuji Detective Agency.

The persistent sound echoed over and over again until the knife's wide blade was swung between flesh and backbone.

I pretended I couldn't hear what was happening. I kept my gaze fixed on the documents in my hands and similarly pretended to concentrate on them.

The tip of the knife was then shoved into flesh between the backbone and ribs. There was neither hesitation nor mercy—only a silent sense of duty.

It was Detective Ayatsuji holding the knife.

When I glanced at him, his expression was as emotionless as always. And yet, something felt slightly different. There was some sort of emotion swirling behind that frigid gaze, but I couldn't tell exactly what that emotion was.

The tip of the detective's knife was now peeling skin from flesh, quietly and patiently. Once the spine and ribs were exposed, he shoved the tip of the knife into a joint connecting them, then twisted the blade. The sounds of bone being stripped apart filled the agency.

I glanced at him once more and couldn't help but wonder:

*Why's he using an army knife and not a butcher knife to cut open a sheep?*

"Detective," I said.

No reply. Every part of him was focused on scraping the rest of the flesh and skin off the ribs.

He knew that he needed to read the military police's report in my hands. It contained the Engineer's—Kubo's—background check, the identity of the smuggler I ran into on the cargo ship, and footage from the ship's security cameras. In other words, making a rack of lamb wasn't on his to-do list, and neither was peeling potatoes to go with it. Neither were grinding herbs and mashing garlic. What he needed to focus on right now was solving the case.

"Detective," I called, "I need you to listen to me."

He was in the kitchen.

"I'm going to season it with some herbs. You fine with that?" he asked.

"We don't have time for this!" I shouted.

The detective immediately stopped what he was doing and shot me a piercing glare.

"Uh... Yeah, I love herbs," I stammered.

He nodded, then returned to cooking.

Two voices were simultaneously screaming in my head. The first one: *We don't have time to be worrying about seasoning! The Division is going to "dispose" of you if you don't solve the case!*

The second one: *Wait. You're cooking for me, too?*

Despite my confusion, the detective continued to peel the garlic, smash it with the side of the knife, then evenly mix it in with the meat. Once that was over, he sprinkled coarse salt into the slits of the meat, ground fresh black pepper over it all, then topped it off with some herbs and olive oil.

Only then did I finally escape the shackles of the seasoning's mouthwatering aroma and regain my sanity.

"Listen," I said. "The smuggler made a full confession. After receiving payment

from an anonymous source, he was asked to sneak Kubo out of the country.” I thought back to the strangely humble smuggler who I’d run into on the ship. “Anonymity isn’t anything unusual in the business, so the smuggler apparently thought nothing of it.”

I paused for a moment to see how Detective Ayatsuji was reacting.

“I’m listening,” he simply stated while still cooking.

“Judging from the way Kubo was acting at the train station,” I continued, “I highly doubt he had any idea about the plan to sneak him out of the country. Therefore, it wasn’t Kubo himself who paid the smuggler. Also, the smuggler apparently explained in great detail to this anonymous source how he was going to smuggle Kubo. In other words, this source knew which crate Kubo was in, and that allowed him to take the Engineer somewhere else to kill him.”

It was highly likely that this anonymous person was behind Kubo’s murder. At the very least, that was the conclusion I’d reached after reading the case files.

“That checks out,” Detective Ayatsuji told me.

“Right?!”

I was an exceptional agent, so obviously, I could solve a mystery or two without the detective’s help.

Detective Ayatsuji turned on the stove, poured some olive oil into the pan, and put it on high heat. He then turned down the heat, placed the meat into the pan, and sprinkled it with garlic until it started to turn a light golden brown.

The aroma was enough to make my stomach growl.

But I was a top-class agent, so there was no way I was going to let a little food distract me.

“And?” Detective Ayatsuji said.

“...Huh? Oh—where was I? Uh... Well... Ah, right. The pieces of wood in and around the corpse’s wounds matched the wood of the crate that the smuggler had hidden him in...which means that Kubo was either killed inside the crate, or at the very least, he was on or near it when he was murdered. At any rate, I decided to take a close look at the ship’s surveillance footage.” I thrust one a

photograph in the detective's face. "And I noticed that a van was seen leaving the ship during our shoot-out."

It showed a small, box-shaped vehicle with no window in the back to reveal what it could be carrying.

"This is the vehicle that carried the crate containing Kubo off the ship. Unfortunately, the camera didn't catch the driver's face on video...but if we find out who was driving this van, then we'll find whoever killed Kubo. It's most likely the person who hired the smuggler and manipulated Kubo in secret."

I pictured the one person it had to be: Kyougoku. The Sorcerer. The Puppet Master.

It was time to put an end to this. Detective Ayatsuji and I were going to settle things with that man once and for all.

However, what the detective said next squashed this resolution of mine in the blink of an eye:

"No."

I stared at him. "...Huh?"

"You're thinking that the driver was heading to Kyougoku's hideout, right? But you're wrong. Kubo was murdered by an ordinary man."

"But—!"

"Look at the photo on the desk."

I followed his gaze.

"Hisashige Kakeba, a college professor. That's the man who killed Kubo."

"What?" I was puzzled. "You already found the culprit?"

Flustered, I grabbed the photo.

It appeared to be some sort of ID. The man had this quiet, gentle look to him that you'd expect from a professor. He appeared to be around thirty years old, give or take. Either way, he didn't seem like the type who would conspire to commit murder or such an unhinged act of violence.

Was this really the man who'd brutally beaten Kubo to death?



“Your detective work wasn’t bad, but it wasn’t correct. This is the man who killed Kubo and knew about his plan to escape. Once Kubo was inside that wooden crate, Kakeba took it to another room in the ship where nobody would see him, then smashed the crate with an iron pipe until he killed Kubo inside it. All he had to do after that was toss the body in the ocean.”

Toss it overboard... True, then he wouldn’t need to carry an entire wooden crate off the boat, which would be difficult with all the security cameras.

But even then...this guy beat Kubo to death with an iron pipe? Was any human strong enough to mangle a body like that?

Compared with most other cases the detective had so brilliantly solved, something about his explanation felt lacking.

“But then...if this really has nothing to do with Kyougoku, what was his motive?” I asked.

“Revenge for a case you know very well: the ‘Reigo Island Massacre.’ One of Kakeba’s friends was a tourist killed on that island.”

“What...?”

Kubo was part of the Reigo Island murder ring and had played a central role in the massacre.

“Now, how Kakeba found Kubo all on his own is something we need to investigate,” the detective said. “Anyway, food’s ready. Get the plates.”

“W-wait. Hold on.” I rushed to stop him. “If that’s true, then we need to arrest Kakeba and hand him over to the Division! This is a top-priority case. You’ll be disposed of if we don’t solve it, and if we don’t hurry, then we risk letting the criminal get away and—”

“The criminal isn’t going anywhere.”

But before I could even ask him why, I saw a chilling glow in his eyes that told me everything.

“He already died in an ‘accident.’”

A skill that went beyond fate and killed criminals...

“I stopped by Kakeba’s house and found the iron pipe with blood on it. I even found evidence that he most likely wiretapped Kubo. That eliminated the need to search for him,” the detective explained. “Kakeba was driving on the highway when he fell asleep at the wheel, crashed into a semi, and died.”

Detective Ayatsuji’s skill would never kill an innocent person. So if this man died in an accident, then that meant he really was the murderer.

“Okay,” I replied. “You want me to get the plates, right?”

I started setting the table.

“I was a little worried to be honest,” I admitted while placing the forks and knives. “You’ve been acting kind of weird ever since you had your face-to-face confrontation with Kyougoku, so I totally thought you weren’t interested in solving the case anymore. But...I’m guessing you cooked this rack of lamb to reward us for solving it?”

“‘Us’?” the detective said in bewilderment as he arranged the fragrant meal onto the plate. “Who said you’re part of this?”

“Huh...? Huh?! Uh...?” I unconsciously twitched in a weird way. “Hold on. This meal is for both of us, right?”

“I hate to break it to you, but as you can clearly see, this is only enough food for one person.”

Detective Ayatsuji lifted the frying pan and showed me the meat.

“What? Wait. Uh...? Then why did I have to suffer through smelling all this delicious meat and garlic and frantically set the table...?”

“It sounds like you need to be put in your place.”

The detective brought the frying pan closer to me.

“Ahhhhhh.”

A strange noise escaped my throat before I could even process what was going on.

Without missing a beat, he brought the frying pan even closer to my face.

“Ahhhhhh.”

Another strange noise escaped my throat.

“You are the Ayatsuji Detective Agency’s private jester.”

I then collapsed.

My mind grew hazy. My vision blurred, and my stomach rumbled.

I could faintly hear Detective Ayatsuji in the background tearing me apart with joke after joke until he could joke no more. By the time he went back into the kitchen for a moment and returned with what vaguely resembled another serving of meat, it was already too late.

The initial shock of being told that I could only smell, not taste, this delicious-looking meal was too much to handle. I passed out, and the detective promptly took my photo.

Incidentally, the rack of lamb ended up tasting so good that I almost wanted to start making strange noises again.

\*

.....

Why didn’t I pursue the question more?

Something felt off. There was a slight contradiction, and if I had searched harder, I would’ve figured it out.

Why wasn’t I able to take that first step forward?

If only I was a little more intelligent, I could have seen how dire the situation was for Detective Ayatsuji. Why was I not smart enough to have noticed that? If only I had a tenth of foresight that Kyougoku and the detective had, then this would have never happened.

But it was all too late now.

That night, Detective Ayatsuji slipped past our surveillance network again and vanished, never to return.

## CHAPTER 6

### Special Division Secret Base *Morning Sunny*

“Hisashige Kakeba isn’t the one who killed him?” I asked, leaning over the conference table despite myself.

“It’s extremely unfortunate, but that is what the evidence suggests,” Sakaguchi replied while adjusting the round-framed glasses on the bridge of his nose.

I had taken the elevator in Skif down to the underground special-operations room. On one of the white walls was a massive monitor displaying a variety of information.

“We reopened the investigation into Kubo’s murder after Detective Ayatsuji’s disappearance,” Sakaguchi told me, flipping through the documents in his hands. “And we discovered a small issue regarding Kakeba’s traffic accident.”

Kakeba, the man Detective Ayatsuji identified as Kubo’s murderer, was a college professor killed by the detective’s skill. I heard that Kakeba had been transported to the hospital after getting into a traffic accident and was pronounced dead three hours later...

“This was something we learned after getting statements from the ambulance crew who took him to the hospital, but there was a discrepancy between the time of the accident according to the police and the actual time of the accident,” Sakaguchi explained. “The ambulance transporting Kakeba was turned away from the first hospital they took him to.”

“He was turned away?”

“The emergency room was full, so the ambulance had no choice but to bring him to a central hospital ten miles away.” Sakaguchi pointed at a map. “Kakeba died soon after arriving. When the Division conducted a detailed investigation,

we learned that the first hospital had turned away a number of patients and came to the conclusion that this wasn't done intentionally."

After processing this information, I asked, "But...what does this have to do with Detective Ayatsuji? It doesn't seem particularly relevant."

"The ambulance took around thirty minutes to reach the second hospital ten miles away, meaning that Kakeba got into that traffic accident around the same time that Kubo's sports car drove onto that ship."

"What...?!"

So...Kubo was still alive when Kakeba died?

"But Detective Ayatsuji's skill..."

I desperately tried to piece everything together. Detective Ayatsuji's skill killed Kakeba because he was the criminal who'd murdered Kubo. But Kakeba died in a car accident while Kubo was still alive. In other words...

"There's only one logical explanation," Sakaguchi declared. "Kakeba died in an ordinary traffic accident, unrelated to Detective Ayatsuji's skill. Moreover, Kakeba didn't know any of the victims who died on Reigo Island. Put simply, the detective made up the entire scenario."

"What?" I couldn't accept it. "But they found the weapon at his house with the victim's blood on it."

"Getting fingerprints and blood from a corpse to create a fake murder weapon would be a piece of cake for someone like Detective Ayatsuji."

I was speechless. Sakaguchi was absolutely right. The detective could have easily made up some random excuse to gain access to the morgue to get Kubo's blood. All he'd have to do after that was pretend like he was investigating Kakeba's residence and plant the fake evidence. Detective Ayatsuji could do that much in his sleep.

But...why would he? What would be the point?

"This is an extremely difficult situation we're in." Sakaguchi furrowed his brow. "Detective Ayatsuji falsified evidence in a Special Division case. He snuck past our surveillance team and disappeared. There's absolutely no excuse for

what he did. This is a breach of trust. I made a direct appeal to Chief Taneda and asked him to hold off on judgment until we get a better grasp of Ayatsuji's actions, but the chief isn't a patient man. Unless we can come up with a good explanation within the next twelve hours, Detective Ayatsuji will most likely be eliminated."

Elimination—that was what happened when the Division decided that a Special A-Grade Dangerous Skill User was out of control.

"Tsuji-mura, I am giving you your next orders as a Special Division agent." Sakaguchi stood up with an extremely serious expression. "Find who really killed Kubo and pinpoint why Detective Ayatsuji would falsify evidence and go AWOL. You have twelve hours. If you fail to do so..."

He paused for a few moments before eventually lifting his head back up.

"...you will personally be ordered to execute Detective Ayatsuji."

\*

I needed to find the real killer. That was the only way out of this.

Someone had taken the wooden crate that had been carrying Kubo, and a few hours after that, his mangled body was found washed ashore. Now that Detective Ayatsuji had betrayed the Division and disappeared, I had to find out who did it.

That's right—I was now the detective.

Detective Mizuki Tsuji-mura.

It had a nice ring to it.

At least, that was what I would have thought under different circumstances. I probably would've done a little dance, too. However, this was honestly a little much for me to handle as my first detective job. I wanted to bury the whole thing in the backyard and forget about it.

How was I supposed to solve a mystery in Detective Ayatsuji's place? A mystery that he created?

The answer was simple. I almost wanted to stomp my feet and scream in frustration.

The mysteries felt endless. Why would Detective Ayatsuji betray the Division? Who killed Kubo—the man responsible for my mother’s death—and why?

This was more than just a job to me. I sincerely wanted answers to each one of these mysteries, and I didn’t want to leave it to someone else to solve them.

The reality, however, was that I had no idea how to be a detective.

I thought back to how Detective Ayatsuji worked. I had accompanied him on numerous cases to supervise him. I saw up close the jobs he accepted, investigated, examined, reasoned, and solved.

So if I were him, where would I start?

My first vague guess pointed to that smuggler. Whoever killed Kubo must have known which crate he was in, which meant that the murderer had to have some sort of connection to the smuggler.

I decided to meet with that smuggler one more time.

\*

Every single thing in this visitation room at the military police’s special detention center was gray. From the floor to the walls, the ceiling, the windowpanes, the tables, the chairs—nothing could escape this ashy hue. It was totally spick-and-span. There must’ve been a steady supply of model inmates to clean up the place.

My eyes darted around in every direction until the door to the cell block opened, revealing the smuggler and a guard.

“Oh! If it ain’t the young lady from the ship! Long time no see! Just as beautiful as always.”

Dressed in a prison uniform, the smuggler walked over with a sunny smile unfit for a detention center.

“Hello,” I said, bowing my head.

Still grinning ear to ear, he took a seat in the chair across from me. “I’ve been in this business a long time, but this is the first time I’ve been locked up. And ya know what? I kinda like it. Nice and quiet. Food’s good, guards are decent, and most of all, I don’t hafta work. I hate working, if ya haven’t figured that out yet.

Maybe I oughta live here.”

“What? Oh, uh... I’m sure you’re free to do so if you want.”

This man really knew how to knock me off my stride.

“Anyway, what brings ya here? Oh, wait. Did you wanna ask me about the time I caught a *hibagon*?”

“No, not exactly.”

*What’s a hibagon?*

“I wanted to ask you about that ship,” I continued. “You were the last person who met Kubo, so I thought you might be able to tell me more about what happened.”

This smuggler had been arrested right after we first met, and he’d been under military police surveillance ever since. That meant he wasn’t Kubo’s killer. I still couldn’t let my guard down around the guy, but I felt it’d at least be worth listening to his side of the story.

“You wanna hear what happened?” He scratched the back of his ear. “I mean, all I did was stuff him in that crate and lock him in. That’s it.”

“You locked it...?”

That must’ve angered Kubo.

But when I asked the smuggler, he waved his hand.

“Nah, nah, it’s no big deal. Not like I’m sendin’ folks on a resort vacation. Safety’s far more important than comfort. One time, I had a client who ended up being claustrophobic and went totally berserk in his crate. He ended up getting caught by security. They apparently threw him overboard while still locked inside, to boot. Poor bastard went sleepin’ with the fishes. Anyway, ever since, I’ve been havin’ my clients take pills to fall asleep, and then I lock ‘em in their crates just to be safe.”

“What kind of pills?”

“For motion sickness. At least, that’s what I tell ‘em.” The smuggler cackled. “Anyway, that one guy—Kubo, was it? He didn’t seem mad when I gave him the



sleeping pills. Besides, it's more nerve-racking to be awake in a tiny box than asleep. He said he knew exactly which crate was the safest and slipped inside on his own."

I raised an eyebrow. "He chose the crate himself?"

That seemed like extremely important information.

"Yep," the man replied, nodding. "Usually, I just stuff 'em in some random crate, but this Kubo fella made a specific request. He told me the crates belonged to some bad people. You know—crates full of stuff ya don't wanna peek at unless you're fixin' to end up dead in the ocean the next day. Not even the deckhands want to get near cargo like that. At least, that's what Kubo told me. That's why I figured it'd be the ideal place to hide him. But, well, he ironically ended up dead in the ocean." The smuggler melodramatically trembled. "Ah, gives me the heebie-jeebies."

*What the heck?* I shifted my brain into overdrive. Surely, Kyougoku gave Kubo a plan to escape when he boarded that train. That was most likely when Kubo heard about the ship, the smuggler, and the so-called safest crate to hide in.

However, that information led to his demise. Kubo ended up being beaten to death while still inside the crate. How did anyone know which crate he was going to be in, though? How did that info leak?

*Hang on.*

What if Kyougoku planned on killing Kubo all along? The Engineer was close to him, even among the adherents to the well. Kubo was probably too much of a liability to keep alive, so Kyougoku must've decided to kill him while making it seem like he was trying to help.

*Hmm...*

It just didn't feel right.

Two things were bothering me. First, if it really was Kyougoku or one of his men who killed Kubo, why would Detective Ayatsuji quit the investigation? He even lied to us about who did it as if he was trying to protect Kyougoku, even though this was his chance to finally defeat the phantom.

Then there was the rationale behind the whole thing. Why would Kyougoku go through all this work and hire a smuggler just to set up a trap? If he really wanted to silence Kubo, he could have easily rigged the train with a bomb. In fact, even I could've come up with countless simpler methods to dispose of him.

Also, what happened to the cargo that was originally inside Kubo's crate? They had to have gotten rid of it somehow so Kubo could fit inside. When I asked the smuggler about it, his eyes softened innocently, and he told me that the police confiscated it all.

*I should probably use my connections at the Division to find out what was inside that crate.*

"I appreciate your cooperation." I got out of my seat. "Do you have anything else to tell me before I go?"

"Sure do."

I shifted my gaze back at the smuggler, since it sounded like there was still some important info that he'd forgotten to mention.

His cheeks warmed into a faint pink while he placed his elbows on the table and bashfully said with a snicker:

*"Hibagon."*

"Thanks again."

I hurried out of the detention center.

\*

Back at the detective agency, I spread the documents out over the desk, then leaned on it and groaned. I'd gathered even more information, files, and photographs on the incident, which were in a chaotic pile in front of me. This included details about the ship, the confiscated goods, and the personal histories of the smuggler and Kubo.

The smuggler had an alibi for the time of Kubo's death. When I spoke with people in the military police's criminal-intelligence division who specialized in trafficking, they told me that the smuggler lost a lot of credibility after what happened. Not only did his client die, but the smuggler himself was arrested. That business was all about trust—at least, according to the agent in charge.

In other words, it was hard to believe that the smuggler had willingly participated in Kyougoku's scheme, since there was nothing in it for him. In fact, he was probably going to be out of a job after this. If he'd known all the details in advance, he would've tried to do better.

I also learned about the cargo that had been emptied from Kubo's so-called "safe" crate. It was registered under the name Saeki, but when the military police arrived at the registered address, the house was completely empty. All they found was a message on his answering machine: *"The cops are on to us. Go where I told you to get rid of the goods."*

When I did a little more digging on this Saeki person, I discovered he was some low-level thug in a trafficking ring. When I looked even further, I discovered that they were connected to a smuggling group within the Port Mafia.

The Port Mafia. Of course.

I figured it had to be them after the smuggler at the detention center told me that even opening those crates was a death sentence. If Kubo truly believed he'd be safe using one of the Port Mafia's crates, then he was gravely mistaken. The Port Mafia was behind the car chase I was in at the harbor; they'd tried to kill me and Asukai after we witnessed one of their shady deals going down. If the goods they'd been smuggling were that important, then the police would've been on the scene within a few hours to investigate.

Basically, Kubo had been tricked, but I still couldn't figure out why.

"Gah... This makes no sense."

I slid forward in the chair, then helplessly lay back over the backrest, letting my arms dangle. The first thing I saw was the ceiling fan. With the agency's master gone, only the fan was watching over it in silence.

I wasn't cut out for work like this. Detective Ayatsuji would have been able to solve this mystery in the blink of an eye.

Where in the world was he anyway? Why would he abandon the agency and betray us?

I was assigned to the Ayatsuji Detective Agency because I'd requested it. The

detective didn't know this at the time, but I'd already figured out long ago that he was the one who killed my mother. So when I was headhunted by the Special Division for Unusual Powers while I was still in training, I gladly accepted, provided that it would allow me to get closer to this one detective. I trained even harder after that until I was officially assigned to monitor him.

I'd always planned on asking him about my mother and what she'd been like before she died a murderer in one of his accidents. Was she really so evil that she deserved death?

I never got the chance to ask...because I always avoided the question, telling myself that I could bring it up some other time.

But maybe I would never get another chance. I was finally concerned about my mother now, of all times? Ridiculous.

"Come on, Mom... Do you really have to keep bothering me even after you're dead...?"

My mother's work kept her away from home most of the time. She'd barely ever said more than a sentence or two to me a week, and whenever she did say something, it was about mundane things like repairs on the house or the car. Always very businesslike.

The nanny was basically the one who took care of me growing up. In fact, I spent more time with her than anyone else, with the exception of my friends.

I still remembered accidentally calling her "Mom" one day when I wanted to ask if I could have a cookie from the pantry. I almost immediately caught myself and felt so stupid. She seemed really uncomfortable...since my real mother was standing by the doorway.

There was no way my mother didn't hear me, but she casually came inside, got changed, and started working in her study. She didn't seem concerned at all that I'd accidentally called someone else Mom.

Deep down...I wished she got angry. I wanted her to be in a bad mood and snap at the nanny and me. It would have been a huge relief just to know that she cared...but that never happened. We had grown so far apart that she wasn't concerned who I called Mom.

There was no longer any way to fix that. My mother was dead. She died a murderer.

I sat up and rubbed my face. I had far too many things I needed to think about, so I had to get her out of my head so that I could focus. Easier said than done, though. Even now, whenever I was alone, it still felt like her ghost was nearby.

All of a sudden, one file floated to the floor. I halfheartedly picked it up and noticed it was a report on evidence from the ship. Maybe it'd been hidden in the pile of papers, and I just missed it? At any rate, it detailed the guns, the car, and what the smuggler had on his person.

There was even a report on the cargo confiscated from the wooden crate.

Apparently, the smuggler had swapped out the crate that'd originally been there with another one to hide Kubo, but the police confiscated the original soon afterward.

*Oh, right, I thought. I totally forgot to check.*

The original crate had been carrying...*lemons*.

Tens of pounds of lemons ready to be processed.

*Lemons?* The most illegal of organizations—the worst of the worst—the Port Mafia was smuggling lemons?

*The heck? Must've been some important lemons.*

Confused, I started imagining mafiosos in black suits baking lemon cakes.

The phone suddenly rang. Not my work cell phone—the Ayatsuji Detective Agency's landline.

I wondered who it could be. Usually, all investigation requests went through the government, so I couldn't really think of anyone who would suddenly call the agency like this.

Except for one person, that is.

I sprinted to the phone as quickly as I could and answered.

"Hello?"

I was right.

*“Stop stealing tea cakes from the agency pantry, Tsujimura.”*

“I’m not!” I reflexively shouted.

It was Detective Ayatsuji.

“Anyway, where are you, Detective?!” I immediately began to shout even more. “Get back here this instant! Everyone in the Division is furious with you! Do you like shoving your head into pots of boiling water or something?! What is wrong with you?”

*“What is wrong with you? Why do you think I’ve been letting some second-rate government org like the Division keep me tied to a post like a horse?”*

I couldn’t even breathe for a few moments.

*“What are you so shocked about? I haven’t even gotten to the good part yet. A secret government team has snipers watching me twenty-four seven, and if I refuse to do a job, they’ll shoot me to death. Who in their right mind would be happy to be in a situation like that?”*

“Wha—?!”

I didn’t know what to say. It felt like extremely powerful emotions were condensing at the very top of my head.

So that was why he’d suddenly disappeared?

*“You talentless mouth breathers will never be able to catch me. I am done with the Division and its suicide missions.”*

“Do you really think they’ll let you do this?!”

I had never shouted so loud in my life.

“You’re a Special A-Grade Dangerous Skill User! You need to be under government surveillance whether you like it or not, even if it puts your life at risk! You have a responsibility, do you not?!”

Tears started welling up in my eyes for some reason.

This was the man I’d been following? The one I’d been monitoring, guarding, and assisting with investigations? Had I really been doing all this for someone so

selfish?

“That selfishness of yours...”

The words gushed out of my throat before I could even process what I was saying.

“That selfishness of yours is what killed my mother!”

My furious scream echoed across the room.

I was breathing heavily; my blood was circulating the rage throughout my body.

Detective Ayatsuji fell silent. It was a weighty silence, but one he eventually broke.

*“That’s not my problem.”* His voice was as cold as ice, deep, and crystal clear. *“A bit of advice: Don’t pursue this case any further. You don’t have what it takes to uncover the mystery of the Engineer’s death.”*

I wanted to argue, but I couldn’t find the right words.

*“Don’t get assigned to any more dangerous skill users like me, either. Take care.”*

He hung up, leaving me trembling with the phone in my hand.

“...Fine, have it your way,” I muttered, only for my words to fruitlessly vanish into the darkness of the room.

\*

I was walking through town that evening. Every once in a while, someone would pass me by on this hillside path, but the only thing following me under the rich orange glow of the setting sun was my long, dark shadow.

I immediately contacted the Division after the detective called me. They promptly began tracing the call, but it was going to be a waste of time. Detective Ayatsuji wouldn’t allow himself to be caught that easily.

However, our phone conversation seemed to bother the Division higher-ups. Detective Ayatsuji was most likely going to be labeled a traitor. Apparently, the Division was shifting their focus to how to stop dangerous skill users. The twelve-hour time limit Sakaguchi had given me would probably be cut short,

too.

Not that I gave a damn, since my mission had effectively been put on hold the moment the detective disappeared. No longer would I be treated like his maid. No longer would I have to watch my back twenty-four seven.

It was over.

I honestly wanted to give up on the investigation into Kubo's murder as well, because the more I involved I got, the more I couldn't stop thinking about my mother and Detective Ayatsuji. Unfortunately, Sakaguchi ordered me to continue looking into the case; there'd been a new discovery about the lemons in that crate.

*"I had forensics take a look at the confiscated lemons," Sakaguchi told me over the phone. "And they actually found something quite interesting. Those weren't ordinary lemons being smuggled."*

"They weren't...?"

I wondered if they were some sort of rare variety.

*"They looked like lemons, but they weren't even fruit. This was cutting-edge technology that replaced the inside of the lemon with a weapon."*

A weapon?

It didn't even make sense to me. Why would anyone go through the trouble of coming up with a way to put weapons inside a lemon while leaving the peel intact?

*"The details are still unknown," Sakaguchi said without even a note of emotion, "but what we do know is that only an expert can disassemble these lemons. Handling them incorrectly could be life-threatening. Therefore, we reluctantly decided to make a deal with the Port Mafia."*

"A deal?"

*The Special Division and the Port Mafia?*

*"I used a personal connection to get in touch with one of the executives. We offered to exchange these extremely rare weapons for some information on them. The Port Mafia accepted, so we handed over the crate. One of their*



*messengers should be with you shortly.”*

It took me some time to wrap my head around the situation.

I'd never heard of the Port Mafia striking deals with the government, let alone handing over top secret information—especially anything that involved illegal weapons. It was unprecedented. Those lemons must have been extremely important to the Port Mafia.

*“Furthermore, Tsujimura...,”* he muttered hesitantly. *“About Detective Ayatsuji —”*

“I don't want know,” I cut in. “He's got...nothing to do with me anymore.”

*“If you were given the order to shoot and kill him, would you do it?”* he asked emotionlessly.

For some reason, I couldn't answer him immediately, even though I knew what I wanted to say.

*“...Of course.”*

It was like someone else's voice coming out of my mouth. Regardless, the mission was over, including my relationship with Detective Ayatsuji.

Sakaguchi told me he would contact me again before promptly hanging up.

In the darkness of twilight, I stood almost in a daze with my phone still in hand.

The path ahead was long. So was the path from which I came. Although sparse, utility poles stood here and there. On my right was a wire-net fence, with a smooth, ash-colored hill on the other side.

The air was a deep vermilion so rich that I could almost drown in it.

They say twilight is the witching hour. A haunted time between night and day, a border between this world and the next. It's a crossroad for various evil spirits, ghosts, and demons. This was Kyougoku's realm.

A terrifying thought crossed my mind.

*Could Detective Ayatsuji have traveled into the realm of evil spirits...where Kyougoku resides?*

There was no guarantee that he hadn't. He'd been acting strange ever since he ran into Kyougoku at that underground shelter. I read through the report detailing what happened, of course, but that didn't necessarily explain everything.

Maybe Detective Ayatsuji had only been working for the government and stopping murderers because it was convenient. Nothing more, nothing less. Maybe he'd gotten too close to Kyougoku and turned evil as a result?

If so, I had to stop him whether I was given orders to execute him or not.

I placed a hand on the holster at my waist and ran my finger down the heavy pistol inside.

That was when I noticed—someone was watching me from behind.

A chill ran down my spine. I knew instinctively that this *someone* wasn't human. Not even the most wicked of people had such a cold, eerie gaze.

It took me a while to turn around.

The witching hour. An empty road. And something was standing right behind me.

The only reason why I managed to muster up enough courage to turn around was because I thought it was Kyougoku, and I couldn't afford to let him escape.

I did an about-face, drawing my handgun.

Nobody was there.

No signs of any humans. Utter silence. The empty path continued into darkness, vanishing with the city soundscape.

All of a sudden, I felt a painful prick on my leg. I looked down and saw it:

The Shadow Child.

It was emerging from my shadow like some creature peeking its head out from a swamp. Its black scythe had pierced me just above my ankle.

After I leaped back in shock, the Shadow Child slowly crawled out of my shadow. Its form flickered, the outline quivering as it quickly transformed into a bipedal beast with horns like a goat. But no matter how hard I stared or

squinted, its wavering figure made it increasingly difficult to see it clearly.

*Why now? What's it doing here?*

The Shadow Child slowly slid across toward me, still clutching its scythe. It was emotionless, unthinking. There was no way to communicate with a creature that possessed no such means.

Even though I couldn't make out where its eyes were, it was eerie how strongly I felt its gaze.

I stepped back. I couldn't control the Shadow Child. I had no idea what it was thinking or what its purpose even was—but I did know that it could kill. Once it started to move, it didn't stop until the target was down, and it didn't miss.

It took a step forward, and I took a step back.

I didn't know why it was here or what it was trying to do. This thing was completely alien and far beyond anyone's comprehension. I just knew that this piercing gaze belonged to it—this creature inside me.

The gut feeling that something bad was going to happen only got worse.

"Stop right there." I pointed my gun at the Shadow Child. "Stop, or I'll shoot."

It continued forward, unfazed. Warnings were pointless; it didn't understand language.

The shadow kept approaching, so I fired my gun.

A perfect shot to the head, and the bullet hit the ground behind it. The Shadow Child was momentarily thrown back and faintly convulsed, but it almost immediately regenerated—as if nothing had happened.

A gun was useless against a shadow.

*What the hell is this skill?*

My veins constricted, robbing my fingertips of warmth. My throat felt like a desert. I couldn't fight back. This shadow would almost definitely outrun me.

I stood there completely numb as the Shadow Child leaped toward me—

"Hey, dumbass! Guns don't work on skills like that!" a voice barked behind me.

Someone reached their arm past me and grabbed the creature's head, slamming it into the ground.

The Shadow Child hadn't even flinched when I shot it, but it couldn't escape this person's grip. In fact, it couldn't get back up, instead struggling pathetically. Even after it was released, the creature still squirmed on the ground.

It was as if its own gravity was weighing it down.

The Shadow Child tried to free itself from its invisible binds before it suddenly stopped moving. It then melted into my shadow and disappeared.

"The Special Division must be really hard up if they're hiring chicks who get freaked out by a puny skill like that."

The person who'd just saved me clapped his black gloved hands and looked at me.

He was a boy—no, a young man.

He had on a black porkpie and a black jacket. Black gloves, too, and even a black leather choker. I wouldn't call him dressy, but every article of clothing he wore was top-of-the-line and expensive. His sharp tongue belied his high-end wardrobe.

I could immediately tell that this young man was steeped in violence and bloodshed. Everything about him was unique to people who walked with death in their shadow—kind of like Detective Ayatsuji.

At any rate, I instantly recognized who this guy was: a member of the Port Mafia.

"Tell Four-Eyes that thanks to him, we were able to dispose of the traitors trying to sell our product on the black market," he said. "Once I give you this info, we're even. Got it?"

The young man pulled out a few pieces of paper from his pocket and tossed them at me. They fluttered in the air and fell to the ground.

Those traitors he mentioned must have been the men in black suits we'd fought at the harbor. They were trying to sell those lemon-shaped weapons to a third party right under their boss's nose.

“I’m guessing the Port Mafia sent you?” I asked the young man.

“Yep. Gotta say, that Four-Eyes is outta his mind, still contacting the Port Mafia after everything that’s happened. I woulda killed him already if my boss let me. But, eh... I guess thanks to him, we recovered the bombs that my men went through the trouble of making.”

*Wait—those lemon-looking weapons were bombs?*

The young man glanced at me after he finished rambling. “Cat got your tongue?”

Only then did I finally realize that I wasn’t breathing.

“How do you know Sakaguchi?” I asked.

“Long story.” The mafia executive swiftly turned around and began to leave. “None of your damn business.”

I knew I should have said something, but all I could do was watch him in silence as he walked away...until he abruptly stopped.

“...Ah, goddamn it! I just realized I owe that four-eyed traitor a personal favor.” The young man scowled. “That asshole must’ve remembered, and that’s why he called me... Hey, you.”

I looked up.

“Your boss saved my ass once, so I’m gonna give you a few words of caution in return.” He pointed at me. “That black beast-like skill that attacked you a few minutes ago—you know, the thing I handled for you? That ain’t your skill.”

I froze. The young man’s voice traveled throughout the darkness before fading into nothingness.

“I knew it,” he said. “You thought that skill was yours, didn’t you? That’s an autonomous skill. It reeked of death, so its owner probably kicked the bucket already. Anyway, be careful. Wouldn’t wanna be killed by someone who’s already dead, would you? Think back to when you got that skill and who died around that time. There’s your clue.”

I stood in a daze. There was only one person who fit that description.

The young man silently walked down the straight path. Meanwhile, I could neither move nor talk. All I could do was silently stare at my shadow shrinking under the escaping vermilion glow.

\*

Ayatsuji was perched on the rim of the well, alone. The forest around him had an otherworldly hue, and the vermilion light of the setting sun turned the well and its surroundings into something ethereal.

“The witching hour, the haunted crossroads... The twilight... The hour of dawn... Hmph,” Ayatsuji muttered to himself.

It was all so clear to him.

This well was positioned on the prefectural border and faced a river. It was a boundary. Narrow crossroads were traditionally considered boundaries. Wells, too, were boundaries between the worlds of soil and water.

*What Kyougoku wanted to accomplish had been presented to me from the very beginning. I simply didn't realize it. That's all.*

Ayatsuji found four shrines on his way here that were built almost exactly like this well: one by the entrance of a cemetery, one by an abandoned gravestone beneath the cliff, one under the bridge over the river, and one by a hut at the foot of a sacred mountain. Each served as a waypoint between the world of daylight and the world of darkness. In other words, they were gates between the land of the living and the land of the dead—places vulnerable to passing spirits. There were most likely countless other shrines throughout the country.

Bad things came from boundaries.

The “evil-creating device” set up in these wells was Kyougoku himself. He granted evil to those with motive, gave them the confidence and motivation to push forward, and drove them down a one-way path to wickedness.

However, why would Kyougoku have created such a device? What was he trying to accomplish that required him to come up with such a grand plan?

Ayatsuji simply had to ask the man himself.

“All right, then.”

When he stood up, a powerful gust of wind swiftly passed through the woods.

The darkened trees violently rustled and stirred as if the forest itself were a life-form whispering to him. He was surrounded.

Nevertheless, Ayatsuji didn't even blink. He took out his pipe, lit it, and inhaled. The smoke flickered like a soul before fading into the cold forest.

He walked away. The time for battle was near, and Ayatsuji already knew where Kyougoku was: the site of their first battle—atop the waterfall spirit lord's waterfall.

\*

I was at the port. The crime scenes had been inspected, and most agents had already gone home.

I aimlessly wandered the harbor while all the recent events swirled in my mind. That Port Mafia executive told me the Shadow Child belonged to a dead person.

I first saw the Shadow Child that day five years ago when my mother died, and it had been ominously following me ever since. Even now, I could feel it watching me from my shadow.

There was only one possibility when I put it all together. The Shadow Child was *my late mother's skill*.

There were various different kinds of skills. Most manifested around their user, but there had been cases of skills that left their master's side in order to attack.

Some skills even remained after their user's death.

The Division's research into unusual powers was generations ahead of private research, and I had read more than a few papers on the subject myself. Most skills vanished when their wielder died, but there was a trend of remotely controlled long-ranged skills like this one where they would continue to attack their target, even after their host was long gone. It was as if they were upholding their master's dying wish.

I didn't want to think about it anymore. I never wanted to imagine that the Shadow Child was *my mother's curse*.

There were multiple times when I wished it helped me: when we were surrounded by that task force, and when we were under attack by the Port Mafia. If my mother had ordered the Shadow Child to protect me, then it should've done that already.

But all it did was watch me in cold, eerie silence. My mother was gone, but her curse remained. The thought alone chilled me to my core until it felt like my intestines had frozen over. Was I destined to live out the rest of my life in fear of this mystifying emotion?

I was lost in thought until my cell phone rang in my pocket, but when I glanced down, I noticed it was from work. I wasn't thrilled, but I still had to answer.

"Tsujimura speaking."

*"Did you find anything on the lemons?"* Sakaguchi calmly asked.

"I did." I took out the files I received from the Port Mafia executive. "The lemons contain a unique explosive that's untraceable, which makes them the weapon of choice during turf wars or at crime scenes. But the only person who has the technology and knowledge to create them is one of the Port Mafia's head scientists, so obviously, countless illegal organizations are trying to get their hands on them and figure how they're made."

*"And that's why they could sell them at a very high price... What a reckless bunch,"* Sakaguchi grumbled. *"I have some new information for you, too. Saeki, the man who the crate was registered under, was found dead on the side of the road."*

"What...?"

Didn't he smuggle goods for the Port Mafia?

*"The cops are on to us. Go where I told you to get rid of the goods"*—that was the last voicemail he'd received before disappearing.

*"While he was fleeing, he fell down the stairs of a pedestrian overpass near the harbor and broke his neck. He was pronounced dead at the hospital,"* Sakaguchi clarified. *"Given the circumstances, it would be a little too convenient to rule this an accident. It's highly likely that he was murdered."*



Something was nagging at the back of my mind.

A man who accidentally fell to his death. A crate registered in his name.

The voicemail message pointed to Saeki being the one who snuck the lemons off the ship. He betrayed the Port Mafia and tried to sell one of their weapons on the black market, but he was worried that an agent was going to catch him, so he panicked and tried to dispose of the lemons. That was Saeki's part in all this.

But if that was true, then something still didn't make sense. Kubo had been fast asleep inside the crate when someone must have mistaken it for the one containing the lemons and taken him away. In other words, the person who killed Kubo had to be someone different from the one who stole the crate. At the very least, Saeki had no motive to kill him. He was afraid that government agents were right on his tail, so he had neither the time nor the reason to beat some stranger inside a crate to death.

It was all too bizarre. I couldn't even imagine what kind of person would have the motive to kill Kubo. The only names that came up during the investigation were people whose situations were urgent and were only taking risks for personal gain or self-preservation. None of them had the time, let alone motive, to kill the Engineer.

*"Tsuji-mura, did you find out who really murdered Kubo?"*

It was hard for me to tell Sakaguchi the truth.

"Not yet."

*"It's probably about time we move on, then."* The issue seemed to weigh heavily on his mind. *"Regardless of the truth, a Special A-Grade Dangerous Skill User is currently out of control and on the loose. I honestly despise moving forward on cases like this when we don't have all the information, but... At any rate, you still remember what you learned in training on pursuing and neutralizing threats, correct?"*

I told him I did. After all, I'd been playing it by the book these past few hours, thinking back to everything written in the secret agent manual.

In fact, I'd been going by the book ever since I was assigned to monitor the

detective.

“Sakaguchi. Detective Ayatsuji said that talentless mouth breathers like us would never be able to catch him,” I managed in a whisper. “And he hasn’t been wrong even once so far since I’ve known him. Do you genuinely believe that the Division can find him?”

*“We are taking the necessary measures to track him down. The Ministry of Home Affairs is expediting negotiations to use government surveillance satellites. Once that happens, we should be able to locate the detective immediately as long as he is outside.”*

They had already started dispatching satellites...which meant that finding and killing the detective had become a matter of national security.

I groaned. My body had been hurting for a while, but I still didn’t know exactly what hurt. Of course I didn’t; it was my soul that was in pain.

I ended up talking on the phone until I was standing before a certain bridge in front of a ship—the same bridge where we’d been hit by that airburst launcher and got into a gunfight.

Most of the cargo on the bridge had fallen into the ocean, probably when the bridge rose. All that was left were a few pieces of scattered debris.

In fact, I never really thought about it during the fight because I’d been so focused on surviving, but why was there cargo just stacked in the middle of the bridge like that anyway?

*“Tsuji-mura, are you listening?”*

“Yes, I’m listening.”

*“I need you to remain calm and listen to me,” Sakaguchi began, followed by a pause. “The Ministry of Home Affairs just finished their council meeting. The vote was unanimous. Detective Ayatsuji is going to be executed.”*

The world distorted before me.

The time had finally come.

It was an order that I’d known was coming, one I was prepared for. But actually hearing him say those words felt like an iron ball falling on my chest. I

almost dropped my phone.

*“Tsujimura... Are you all right?”*

“...I’m fine,” I managed to reply after taking a few seconds to steady my breathing.

Orders from the Division could not be ignored. There was no going back once the higher-ups made their decision.

*“You will be briefed on your upcoming mission back at headquarters until we can deploy the satellites, so I need you to come back.”*

I couldn’t say a word.

Sakaguchi tried to say something as well, but he stopped himself. A few moments of silence went by until he eventually hung up.

As I stood alone in a daze on the bridge, Detective Ayatsuji’s final words to me repeated in the back of my mind:

*“A secret government team has snipers watching me twenty-four seven, and if I refuse to do a job, they’ll shoot me to death. Who in their right mind would be happy to be in a situation like that?”*

The Special Division for Unusual Powers was the country’s top organization of skill users. Our Special Forces, also known as the Black Tiles for their all black attire, were especially skilled in neutralizing dangerous skill users. There wasn’t a single human alive who could escape from them. Even Detective Ayatsuji wouldn’t stand a chance, especially since they already knew what he was capable of.

At any rate, if the detective meant what he said and truly despised the Division’s surveillance team, then the Division would probably be to blame for his newly decided fate.

An indescribable emotion swelled in my chest. Perhaps being this shook up was proof that I wasn’t fit to be an agent. But I still had to carry out my duty.

I turned around to go back to headquarters when I got a notification on my phone. It was a file containing electronic data from the military police. They’d apparently uncovered who this Saeki person really was. The data contained a

photograph of his face, his height, his body type, and so on. I skimmed the whole thing, hardly even processing any of it.

That is, until one part caught my eye.

**Saeki was a con man before he began working as a lower-level thug for the Port Mafia and made a living extorting money from a major company. However, once he became a murder suspect, he left that world behind once and for all.**

Something clicked in my head. Something made me uncomfortable about this information. I felt like I'd heard this story before.

I frantically began flipping through the files, then pulled out the report detailing Detective Ayatsuji's encounter with Kyougoku in the underground shelter.

There was no mistaking it. Saeki matched the description of the criminal behind the "Murderer's Box"—a case that Detective Ayatsuji solved. It was the same person.

But...what did that mean? Saeki was murdered in order to be silenced. If someone ever figured out where he took that crate, then the real criminal would be naturally caught as well. Therefore, Saeki was pushed down the stairs and killed.

*Hold on.*

He fell to his death.

It was an accident.

Saeki died *right after* Detective Ayatsuji solved the locked-room mystery.

It all made sense now. Why didn't I realize this sooner?

Saeki was murdered to keep him from talking, but nobody was directly involved in his death. He died because Detective Ayatsuji's skill activated the moment the detective solved the locked-room case.

In other words, this, too, was merely a small part of Kyougoku's scheme. He had the detective solve the mystery of that murder in order to kill Saeki. But why? What kind of dirt did Saeki have on him?

Saeki died soon after transporting that crate somewhere. If only the Division had gotten to him earlier, he would most likely have confessed to something. Detective Ayatsuji would have never been asked to solve the mystery of Kubo's murder, either. In other words, Kyougoku wanted to create a situation where Detective Ayatsuji would have no choice but to take that job. But why?

While lost in thought, the tip of my toes bumped into something. I looked down and found a pale chunk of wood lying on the ground—most likely a part of a crate I'd sped through on the drawbridge. It was nothing more than a single piece that had survived the crash and didn't fall into the ocean, but something about this stood out to me for some reason.

The old me two years ago wouldn't have thought anything of it, but after experiencing multiple cases by Detective Ayatsuji's side and witnessing the moment he solved these mysteries, I couldn't help but feel like there was more to it. I picked up the piece of wood.

It had definitely been part of some sort of container, but it was hard to imagine what it used to look like before I ran over it. At any rate, this color looked oddly familiar...

I began hearing things.

*"Mystery solved, Tsujimura. You did it."*

Past events surged through my head in the blink of an eye.

Lemons. Smuggler. Port Mafia.

*"The cops are on to us. Go where I told you to get rid of the goods."*

After someone from the Port Mafia gave Saeki those orders, he must have hurried to get that crate off the ship. He probably felt that he would be done for if anyone learned about the lemons, so he needed to destroy all the evidence to throw both the police and the Port Mafia executives off his trail.

But how would he do that? He didn't have much time to work with. Not even our crime lab could dismantle those lemon-shaped explosives, and if you tried to hide them, some government agent would have found them after our gunfight, since every single inch of that ship and the harbor was searched. Maybe he considered tossing them overboard, but that would be pointless. The

lemon bombs were perfectly sealed—the seawater wouldn't even affect them. A diver would have been able to easily find the bombs after the crate sank to the bottom of the harbor, and it wouldn't matter who that diver was working for; the traitors would be killed all the same.

Then what could he have done? How would he have been able to erase the evidence without a trace?

*What if Kyougoku predicted this entire scenario?*

Kyougoku made sure to time it perfectly so Kubo would arrive at the port by a specific time, and that time happened to be in the middle of those Port Mafia traitors' shady deal, which forced us into a gunfight. But what if Kyougoku wasn't only manipulating Kubo? What if he was behind the lemon smuggling?

*Think back to the well, Mizuki, I told myself.*

Kyougoku essentially gave these people the illusion of free will while he manipulated them to his liking, so maybe he put it into their heads that they could steal bombs from the Port Mafia? Maybe that well told them how to do it without getting caught, and they believed it. Even if they were caught, they had a way to completely dispose of the evidence. "I will give you all the knowledge in the world. Whether or not you use it is up to you." That must have been what Kyougoku told them.

The traitors also knew how to dispose of the evidence: Detonate them. That was the only way to get rid of all the bombs without leaving a trace. But these bombs were extremely powerful; you'd have to set them off remotely, and that would require a code, which the criminal would somehow have to get their hands on. However, that head scientist of the Port Mafia—the creator of these explosives—would most likely catch them in the process. Therefore, the ideal solution would be *to get someone to step on them*. These lemons would explode simply by trying to dismantle them, so stepping on them was an easy way to get rid of all of them at once. And that was why Saeki was given orders to place the crate of lemons somewhere that got a decent amount of traffic.

Put simply, the drawbridge was the perfect spot. Once the lemons exploded, everything would fall into the ocean. The explosives would turn into dust and fall overboard as well, making it impossible to analyze and trace them. The

center of the drawbridge, where it would split in half, would be the ideal location if you wanted to make sure everything fell into the water, and that was where I was standing right now.

Kyougoku's scheme.

The well.

Detective Ayatsuji lying to us when he said that someone else was behind Kubo's death.

"...But then..."

The truth hit me like a tidal wave.

I sank to the ground, unable to breathe.

Detective Ayatsuji had it all figured out. Once his skill activated, there was no way to cancel it. Even if the request had been withdrawn, the skill wouldn't stop until the criminal was dead.

Furthermore, what the detective's skill defined as a criminal followed a set of rules. The criminal had to have the intent to kill, and the victim had to die of a physical cause purposely orchestrated by the criminal.

So who had this intent to kill?

The smuggler had no intention of killing anyone. He was just trying to do his job, which was stuffing Kubo into a crate and giving him some sleeping pills. He acted of his own free will.

Same with Saeki. All he was trying to do was his job: sneaking the crate off the ship and placing it on the drawbridge so someone would run over it. He acted on his own will.

The Port Mafia had no intention of killing him. The drawbridge had no intention of killing anyone, either.

So who wanted Kubo dead?

*—I'm going to catch him, no matter what, and once I get my hands on him...*

I covered my face with my hands. I couldn't stop trembling.

*I was the one who wanted to murder him.*

I hit Kubo with my car and killed him.

Detective Ayatsuji betrayed the Division because he didn't want me to die in an "accident."

\*

Ayatsuji was walking through the mountain pass alone.

The evening glow gradually faded as darkness crawled from the depths of the forest. Once twilight had passed, the woods belonged to the beasts that watched Ayatsuji through the black thickets.

The detective paid no heed to the creatures of the night during his quiet stroll. A deep silence fell upon the forest. The beasts soundlessly, lamentably observed Ayatsuji's journey ahead.

He had lost.

Ayatsuji had earned himself unadulterated defeat that filled every cell in his body. Each step he took along the uneven path was heavy and unstable, to the point that he could hardly keep himself from falling forward.

Nevertheless, he had to keep moving, for the final battle awaited.

Kyougoku had called for him so that they could settle this once and for all. Even if only defeat awaited ahead, Ayatsuji could not back down. Somebody had to end this. Far too much blood had been spilled, and Ayatsuji couldn't afford to let the conclusion to their game be stretched out any longer. Even if this meant Kyougoku had won, someone had to close this case.

Before Ayatsuji even realized it, the silent drizzle had dyed the air on the mountain path a pale blue. Each breath he took rose like a cloud of white smoke as the night dragged on.

The night belonged to the revenants.

\*

"We have our target. He's approximately three miles from here on the forest trail," the radio officer reported inside the police armored vehicle.

Sitting in the troop carrier seats were two fully equipped Special Forces members, four Special Division agents, and two MP investigators. Faintly



illuminating the individuals sitting in these bench-like seats was a single red light, creating shadows that crawled up the walls like ghosts.

This wasn't the only vehicle transporting Special Forces members, either. Four other vehicles were here to completely surround the target.

Not even Detective Ayatsuji would be able to escape this many soldiers.

*Not even Detective Ayatsuji...*

"Tsuji-mura, did you make sure to check all your equipment?" Asukai casually asked by my side.

"..."

But I couldn't reply.

"There's no telling what's going to happen when we get there, so you should at least check your bulletproof vest and make sure you have enough spare ammo."

I knew that I needed to listen to his advice for my own sake, but my mind was preoccupied with something else, and there was no way any outside information was going to get inside.

Asukai scratched his head in a troubled manner. "Oh, hey. I have some pickled vegetables. Want some? They just came out with this flavor."

"...No thanks..." I replied in a thin voice that took everything I had.

The same questions had been tormenting me ever since I figured out what happened.

*What should I do? What can I do?*

Detective Ayatsuji had run away to save my life. After he received orders to search for Kubo's murderer, his skill partially activated, and there was no way to cancel it. All he needed was the tiniest shred of evidence, and then I would be dead.

That was why he'd had no choice but to abandon this case. He could only delay it, since his skill couldn't be stopped, and now he was being hunted by the Division because of that.

No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't come up with anything new. I couldn't change the situation or how it was going to turn out. There was nothing I could do. I'd been given orders to shoot and kill, and once you were given orders, you couldn't refuse.

Even if I told them the truth, that didn't change the fact that Detective Ayatsuji went AWOL, lied about who the murderer was, and betrayed the Division. In fact, being allowed to freely go outside was probably nothing short of a miracle for a Special A-Grade Dangerous Skill User, even if someone was always keeping an eye on him. The recoil hit me all at once.

"I know how you feel," Asukai abruptly told me, heaving a deep sigh. When I looked over, he was staring hard at a single point on the wall. "I've been thinking the entire time about how we could fix this, but the situation couldn't be worse. There's nothing I can do."

I couldn't see his expression in the dimly lit vehicle, but I heard how his hushed tone echoed off the shaking vehicle's walls.

"Tsuji-mura, you've been quiet this whole time...but be honest with me. You have a good idea why Detective Ayatsuji ran away, don't you?"

"...Yes." I faintly nodded.

"I knew it." He sighed again. "This was all part of Kyougoku's plan, wasn't it?"

"I...think so."

The accomplices—the smuggler, Saeki, and the Port Mafia—had no intention of killing Kubo.

The criminals who put Kubo in that crate and carried him to the bridge were only interested in benefiting themselves. None of them ever imagined that they were helping to kill someone. In other words, they weren't going to be targeted by Detective Ayatsuji's skill.

The closest thing we had to a criminal in this case was me.

There was no way this was a coincidence, either. The smuggler, Saeki, and the Port Mafia thugs all unknowingly played a part in the Puppet Master's scheme.

This was an attack that capitalized on the flaw of a skill that caused criminals

to die in accidents. It was the single weakness of Detective Ayatsuji's skill, which nobody could have even predicted.

There was only one man who could have done this: the detective's archnemesis, the Puppet Master...

"Kyougoku..."

It was too well planned and created with the wisdom of a demon. It was like precise gears moving perfectly in motion with one another.

I trembled. The exit had been completely sealed. There was no way to escape now.

I had no idea just how colossal the enemy we were up against really was. There were no bounds to his evil and cunningness.

"Kyougoku has finally driven Detective Ayatsuji into a corner," Asukai softly muttered. "But that doesn't mean there's nothing we can do."

I slowly looked toward him. "...What?"

*There's still hope...?*

"Detective Ayatsuji is going to settle things with Kyougoku face-to-face," Asukai said; he seemed to be racking his brain. "Even Detective Ayatsuji won't be able to outrun the Division, so he's most likely planning on going straight to Kyougoku to settle things before his time runs out. This brief moment will be our last chance to catch Kyougoku."

"Catch Kyougoku'?! " I yelled despite myself.

"Keep your voice down," Asukai whispered. "I know this isn't the smartest plan I've ever had, but the Division is surrounding Detective Ayatsuji as we speak, which means we're also that much closer to Kyougoku. We can use that to our advantage and arrest him. Kyougoku's confession is the only thing we have that can prove the detective's innocence."

But still...

...would such a reckless plan even work on this man?

"...A few years back, my partner and I were investigating Kyougoku," Asukai

said out of the blue. “It was an uneventful case. I mean, our suspect was just a regular guy. Hadn’t even committed a single crime. He was completely clean. But after a while, it was like murders were following him wherever he went, so we were given orders to surveil him just in case.”

He looked like he was taking a trip down memory lane.

“But one day, when I returned to the surveillance room, I found my partner dead. Sliced right open.” Asukai rubbed his face, seemingly exhausted. “I found the criminal almost immediately. He was just an ordinary burglar sneaking into what he thought was an empty house. There was no evidence that anyone gave him the orders to do what he did, but I knew what really happened. Kyougoku was behind it.”

After removing the leather gloves that he always wore, he quietly stared at his hands as if he could still see his partner’s blood staining them—as if he could still feel the weight of her lifeless body.

“I learned later that my partner, Yui, was three months pregnant.” Asukai shook his head. “I’ve been chasing Kyougoku ever since then. I don’t need any evidence. All I need is to see his dead body lying on the ground in front of me.”

I closed my eyes. “Same here.”

The battle between Detective Ayatsuji and Kyougoku was one between gods in the heavens, and all ordinary people like us could do was watch in awe.

However...if Kyougoku believed that he was too high up for our bullets to reach him, he was wrong.

“You heard the update, right? The satellite found Detective Ayatsuji near a path in the woods. But the forest cover this late at night is making it impossible to track him any further, so the Division is going to encircle the area and search for him on foot. They think he’s trying to run away, so they’ll slowly close in on him, but—”

“Detective Ayatsuji isn’t running from anyone,” I said. “I think I know where he might have gone.”

“The moment the Special Forces surround him, he’s dead.” Asukai cautiously nodded back at me as he put his leather gloves back on. “So in order to save the

detective, we need to get to Kyougoku first and force a confession out of him. This is our last chance, as slim as it may be.”

Getting Kyougoku to confess to his crimes... We understood very well how difficult and unrealistic that would be, but there was nothing else we could do.

I breathed in and out.

*“That selfishness of yours is what killed my mother!”*

That day, I let my anger get the best of me and yelled at Detective Ayatsuji over the phone.

I was wrong, though. He didn’t run away because he was selfish or anything remotely close to that. If I’d let my guard down for even a second, the sadness would swell in my throat until it expelled from my mouth.

I had no idea if Detective Ayatsuji would be able to face Kyougoku. Nor did I know if I’d catch up to the detective before Kyougoku disappeared. But there was one thing I did know—and I could no longer hide it.

Even as a top-class agent who followed orders, even if shooting the detective was the right thing to do, even though I’d been training for a day like this—

—I couldn’t shoot Detective Ayatsuji.

\*

The waterfall roared. Splashes of water rose up the ravine like smoke.

No longer was there any light from the evening sun, and any man-made light was far off in the distance. If twilight was the hour of evil when the border between this world and the next were connected, then the top of the waterfall that night was the path to the netherworld. The rules of the material world did not apply in *this world*. The only light was the crescent moon carved by the claws of a wraith.

A single shadow was silently standing tall in the realm of demons.

He was a tall man, wearing a flat cap and sunglasses while staring emotionlessly into the distance as the night breeze brushed against his body.

This man, the Homicide Detective, remained perfectly still and silent. Only his thoughts wandered the curtain of night before melting into profundity.

“This really brings back memories,” he suddenly commented.

His deep voice resonated like a stringed instrument, vibrating the air until it was absorbed into the rustling trees.

“It truly does,” a voice eventually replied behind him. The easygoing voice whistled like a flute as if to hide what the man was really thinking. “I believe we had our last battle here three months ago already. How time flies.”

“You fell from this cliffside.”

Kyougoku appeared to be in a trance as he reminisced about that day. “It felt like a dream.”

“You’ve been preparing for this moment ever since then, haven’t you?” Ayatsuji said, looking back.

A silhouette slithered forward from the mountain’s shadows without making a sound. The right half of the elderly man’s face was hidden under the shadows of the trees, while the left was illuminated by the dim moonlight. It was like half of his body had melted and blended into the darkness, fusing with the mountain forest as if he were a part of this otherworldly ravine.

“I have no authority. I have no companions. All I have is this head. Inside here...” Kyougoku tapped his temple. “Paradise exists. There is such a thing as a perfect world. ‘As a lump of salt exists purely in its taste, so too does the atman—the self—exist as wisdom.’”

“Quoting Sanskrit scriptures now? Have some consistency.”

“I seek only the truth in my readings. Sun Tzu, Kant—even ‘Can Quantum-Mechanical Description of Physical Reality Be Considered Complete?’”

“Now you’re reading up on Einstein’s EPR paradox? I suppose you would like quantum mechanics, since it deals with perception and the undefined.”

The jet-black trees rustled in the wind. Pale mist from the waterfall basin hovered between the two men.

“Ayatsuji, I am truly grateful to you,” Kyougoku said, lifting his chin. “You were a great help in achieving my goal. Nobody else could have accomplished what you did.”

“I bet,” Ayatsuji replied. The dead leaves at his feet faintly crunched as he slowly walked over them. “Your goal isn’t murder. Nor is it to defeat me. So tell me. What are you after?”

“Diffusion,” Kyougoku promptly replied in a hoarse voice. “Do you understand the true nature of ghosts?”

Ayatsuji silently glared at the Sorcerer.

“The true nature of ghosts is to diffuse.” Kyougoku rubbed his fingers together. “On a personal level, to live is to experience fear. In the mountains, in the water, in the darkness of your own heart—there are other worlds with concepts beyond human understanding. Nevertheless, fear alone means nothing; it produces no specters. Ghosts spread through writings and word of mouth. That is how they migrate to the hearts of others. The *gyuuki* in rivers and beaches, the smoke monster *enenra*, the invisible bird *Basabasa*—specters are information-based life-forms that feed off fear and then spread. They are built into villages, towns, and cities, and they are immortal.”

“And they don’t exist,” Ayatsuji insisted, his voice low.

“Precisely. Ghosts do not exist,” Kyougoku agreed. “By that same logic, neither do gods. Nor do money, gender, authority, and even language exist. These are all merely shared ideas.”

Ayatsuji pondered in silence for a few moments before replying, “Like memes.”

“Exactly.” Kyougoku nodded with evident satisfaction. “I knew you would find the humor in it. Memes as described in *The Selfish Gene* spread through word of mouth and then replicate. They’re just like ghosts. Take the typical *inugami*—possession by a dog spirit. This spirit’s meme spreads throughout the population until it becomes a shared delusion—a folie à deux. In other words, ghosts are living memes that infect the human mind. Memes and genes are two sides of the same coin, a Noah’s ark of information. If you ask me, ghosts, who spread and live on as memes across millennia, are far more exceptional specimens than humans, who spread slowly through genes.”

Kyougoku took a step forward, but his step didn’t even make a sound.

“And just as ghosts are memes, so too is the concept of evil.”

When the detective looked up, the moonlight illuminated the flash of realization on his face.

“So that’s what this is, Kyougoku. Your goal is—”

\*

I was running up the mountain path. Sweat dripped down my forehead, and my ragged breath came out of my lungs in explosive bursts. My feet were throbbing from moving around so much in my shoes. Nevertheless, I couldn’t stop sprinting as fast as my legs would carry me. If Detective Ayatsuji came to these mountains to settle things with Kyougoku, then there was only one place he could be: by the cliffside of the waterfall. It was the same place they’d fought three months ago and the place where the detective defeated Kyougoku.

Detective Ayatsuji must have uncovered how Kyougoku survived that fall, so this time, he was going to make sure to put an end to the phantom once and for all. But this was still Kyougoku he was up against, and there was no telling what that man would do. Plus, the Division was closing in on Detective Ayatsuji, which put him at a disadvantage already. That was why I had to reach him first, no matter what.

“Detective...Ayatsuji...! Why are you...like this...?!” I yelled while running.

I wasn’t getting enough oxygen. Although my lungs felt like they were going to pop, my legs gradually started to move more quickly in spite of the pain. I continued to push myself ahead across the beaten path to get there even if only a second sooner.

It wasn’t muscle moving my legs. Blood wasn’t giving me the power to sprint. The source of this speed was something that couldn’t be seen with the human eye. They were indescribable words escaping from my throat.

“You think I’m just a kid...so you...!”

I squeezed the words out of my trembling mouth.

“You left without...even saying a word...! You coldhearted jerk...!”

I felt no pain nor fear running through the dark mountains. Something was



going to happen to Detective Ayatsuji, and before that happened...I had to talk to him.

\*

“What is evil?” Kyougoku said with a raised finger. He walked toward Ayatsuji, his steps utterly silent. “The question has been asked countless times—in a court of law, in history books, in fairy tales... However, I believe that life is inherently evil. That is to say, all living beings prioritize themselves.”

Kyougoku kept walking, his voice melting into the mist.

“Lions will kill the previous leader’s cubs after taking over a pride. Chimpanzees will kill their neighbors or infants and devour them. Dolphins will gang up on porpoises for fun, taking turns biting chunks out of the victim for long periods of time before beating them to death. Life contains the seeds of evil from the very beginning. Harming others for one’s own benefit is unacceptable in our society—that much is true. Such behavior would destroy this system as we know it. However, protecting yourself and those you love are part of what make us human. Wouldn’t you agree? When society becomes nothing more than a machine to suppress the true brilliance of man, what is there to bring humankind freedom if not evil?”

“What is this, your new religion?” Ayatsuji’s tone was frigid. “Is this why you made that well that could ‘turn people evil’?”

“Not everyone is as strong as you, Ayatsuji.” There was faint warmth in Kyougoku’s hoarse voice. “People were drawn to my well because they felt they were being crushed by society. These innocents couldn’t even scream, so they clung onto evil as a last resort to restore their humanity. In a way, what I did was an act of charity.”

“That’s some twisted logic you’ve got there,” Ayatsuji spat. “Let’s not forget that you made a married couple shoot each other in the head. Was that charity, too?”

“At the very least, both of their daughters were saved.”

“ ... ”

Ayatsuji glared murderously at Kyougoku.

“Of course,” said Kyougoku, “I understand that this is sophistry, but a meme such as ‘evil’ truly does tug at the heartstrings. It inspires. In other words, it can reproduce. I do not intend to save the world with that well. What’s important to me is reproduction. The fertility of ghosts and urban legends is similarly essential to my life’s work. You, too, are just as irreplaceable to my mission.”

Kyougoku walked right up to Ayatsuji’s side.

The white waterfall. The slender crescent moon. The roaring of the falls and howling of the wind.

It was like looking into a mirror of their battle three months ago. The players were the same. The sound of the waterfall was the same. There was only one difference.

“I’ve been doing all the talking here.” Kyougoku laughed. “It’s your turn, Ayatsuji. Time for the detective to solve the mystery.”

“...Yeah,” Ayatsuji quietly muttered.

“Let’s hear your answers. There are two mysteries. The first: how I survived your skill when you produced that copper coin as evidence. The second: how I disappeared from the underground shelter after you solved the case. Ready?”

“Instead of answering, I’m going to give you this.”

Ayatsuji held out a gun he had been hiding and *aimed it at Kyougoku*.

“...Oh?” Kyougoku seemed taken aback. “I thought detectives preferred to use their heads to solve cases.”

“I don’t have any preferences when it comes to you.”

“Clearly,” Kyougoku said, cackling. “But are you sure, Ayatsuji? You are being pursued by the Division as well. If they catch you with a gun, they’ll surely kill you on sight before you even get to explain yourself, yes?”

The detective forcefully pressed the gun up against Kyougoku’s temple with a loud *thud*.

“I don’t care.”

Ayatsuji cocked the gun, then placed his finger over the trigger.

Kyougoku gazed up at the night sky with a smile. "What a beautiful moonlit night."

*Bang.*

\*

A chill suddenly ran down my spine. I briefly froze.

Gunfire. And three shots, at that. Even the sounds of roaring gunfire were absorbed by the surrounding black trees.

The top of the waterfall was just up ahead, and the flashes of light I saw were coming from that direction as well. Did Detective Ayatsuji shoot Kyougoku? Or did Kyougoku shoot him? Whatever happened, the final battle was reaching its conclusion almost right before my eyes.

"Detective Ayatsuji!"

I sprinted once more while taking my pistol out of its holster. Kicking dirt into the air with each step, I leaped over a pile of stones toward their face-off.

When I arrived at a clearing, I noticed a tall, shadowy figure illuminated by the moonlight.

There was no doubt about it. It was Detective Ayatsuji with a pistol in his hand. I made it in time. Kyougoku had to be nearby.

"Detective! Get away from Kyougoku!"

I approached them with my pistol held at the ready, staying cautious of my surroundings.

"Tsuji-mura," the detective quietly uttered once he glanced at me. "You came all this way... You really know how to be a thorn in my side, don't you? What about the Special Division? They should be here any moment to kill me."

"There's no time!" I shouted. "Where is Kyougoku?! We can make him confess to everything! That's the only way I can save you!"

My pistol searched for the enemy. *It's too dark. Too many shadows. Where is he? Where's Kyougoku?*

"Kyougoku's right here." Detective Ayatsuji glanced to his side. "Say hello, Kyougoku."

\*

“Kyougoku’s right here.” Ayatsuji looked over his shoulder at Kyougoku. “Say hello, Kyougoku.”

“Greetings.” The Sorcerer grinned. “Your familiar is quite the loyal one. She ignored her organization’s orders and came here all by herself. I’m jealous.”

“She isn’t my familiar,” Ayatsuji insisted, shifting his gaze at Tsujimura, who was still desperately searching for Kyougoku.

\*

“She isn’t my familiar,” the detective told someone at his side.

I promptly aimed my gun where he was looking.

*I’ve got you now.*

“Kyougoku, can you hear those footsteps? They belong to the Special Forces.” Detective Ayatsuji peered into the forest. “The end-time for us is near.”

I heard footsteps as well—the footsteps of soldiers running through the woods. We were out of time.

“What? Oh, sorry about that, Kyougoku. I’m sure you wanted to see me terrified, but unfortunately, I don’t get scared when I already know what’s going to happen.”

Detective Ayatsuji was talking to Kyougoku. That much was undeniable.

“...No, Kyougoku,” the detective said. “You of all people should understand... What?”

I searched for the enemy with my gun drawn, but when I stopped in front of Detective Ayatsuji, there was nobody there.

Cold dread filled my throat.

“Detective!” I shouted with my gun held out. “There’s *nobody here! Nobody!*”

\*

“You’re wasting your time, Tsujimura.” The detective placed a hand on Tsujimura’s shoulder. “I realized it when I was in the underground shelter. That bunker was an unescapable prison. Not even the smartest man in the world could escape without me noticing. Therefore, there was only one explanation.”

Kyougoku grinned by his side. “You got me.”

“Kyougoku was *never there to begin with*.”

Tsujimura gaped in astonishment.

“That was the trick behind his escape,” Ayatsuji told her. “The reason why Kyougoku was able to survive a fall from the top of the waterfall was *because he actually didn’t survive*. Nobody can escape death once my skill activates. Occam’s razor, Tsujimura: The simplest hypothesis is the right one.”

He directed his gaze to the grinning Sorcerer and revealed:

“Kyougoku died when he *fell off this cliff three months ago*.”

“B-but...” Tsujimura turned pale, her voice trembling. “Then this... Everything that’s been happening...”

“All that’s left are remnants of the man—his *spirit*. Right before he died, he used his skill to possess me, and that’s why there’s no way you can get him to confess to prove my innocence. He is no longer of this world.”

\*

Detective Ayatsuji’s deep, resonant voice reverberated under the moon. I staggered forward on trembling legs.

“This...can’t be happening...”

Kyougoku was dead? Detective Ayatsuji was talking to an evil spirit created by Kyougoku’s skill?

I desperately tried to recall the sequence of events.

The first time Kyougoku appeared after that incident three months ago was when that married couple shot each other in front of Detective Ayatsuji. The only other witnesses were the husband and wife—who were both dead. Me and the Special Division knew about Kyougoku’s return solely because of the detective’s report. We hadn’t actually seen him ourselves.

The next incident with Kyougoku was at the train tracks after we caught Kubo. Kyougoku had talked with Detective Ayatsuji through a wireless communicator. Nobody else even heard his voice. Everything we knew came from what Detective Ayatsuji told us.

Then there was the incident in the underground shelter. Once again, Kyougoku and Detective Ayatsuji were the only two people there. Nobody else saw Kyougoku.

Neither the smuggler nor Kubo had met Kyougoku in person. Nobody... Not a single soul...

“But...that’s...” My hand holding the gun was trembling. “Kyougoku’s...dead...? Then what are we even fighting...?”

“Kyougoku was a singularity born in this country,” the detective quietly explained. “The massive, intangible tricks he came up with before he died are transmitted through other people. They transcend time and spread like a disease. Whether or not he has a physical body is hardly an issue now.”

“But then... Why?” My voice quavered. “Why would he want to do this...even after death...?”

“You made it all this way without figuring it out?” There was no emotion in his voice. “The well. The rumors of the evil shrines. The self-replicating memes—his intentions are clear.”

Detective Ayatsuji shifted his gaze to the empty space next to him—and he muttered hoarsely:

“You wanted to become a supernatural entity—a creature of folklore. Didn’t you, Kyougoku?”

“Drop your weapons!” a voice on the cliff top furiously shouted.

They had surrounded us without even making a sound. It was the Black Tiles, Japan’s strongest forces for neutralizing skill users. There were twenty-two shock troops and six snipers—we couldn’t escape.

“Wait!” I shouted. “Detective Ayatsuji didn’t betray the Division! He was trying to protect me, so he—”

“Tsuji-mura, stand back. Motive no longer holds any meaning,” a calm voice demanded.

Sakaguchi emerged from the darkness of the woods. An exceptional Special Division agent and a master at handling skill-related crimes who had

successfully completed a great number of top secret operations.

“Ayatsuji, you have been deemed a threat to the peace and order of this nation,” Sakaguchi said. His chilling, commanding voice echoed over the cliff. “You are not a simple criminal but a Special A-Grade Dangerous Skill User, and as such, you will be ‘disposed’ of as required by the Special Division for Unusual Powers.”

“Wait...!” I cried.

But when I tried running over to stop him, a jet-black hand suddenly grabbed my arm from behind.

I was robbed of my gun, and I felt more hands on my neck and shoulder before I was slammed onto the ground. Numerous Special Forces in black were now straddling me, leaving me incapacitated.

My ribs began to crack as if they were crying. I felt the air in my lungs being squeezed out.

But that wasn’t enough to get me to stop shouting.

“Detective Ayatsuji! Tell them what really happened—!”

Something cold touched the back of my skull, and I realized that I had a gun to my head.

Even those who tried to cover for targets of elimination would be eliminated. That was the rule.

“Stop! Tsujimura isn’t a criminal! Put your guns down!”

I could hear someone sprinting this way—Asukai. I couldn’t see him, since I was pressed face-first onto the ground, but I could feel him ripping the gun away from my head.

“Surely, this situation doesn’t surprise you, Detective Ayatsuji.”

Only when I heard Sakaguchi’s chilling voice did fear finally start to take over.

He was always calm and composed, strict and intelligent, and although sometimes sarcastic, he was a good, reasonable boss who I could always count on.

However, the instant I heard his voice, it dawned on me.

Sakaguchi wasn't even remotely uncertain anymore. He was more than ready to kill Detective Ayatsuji. Right now, Sakaguchi thought robbing a criminal of their life was no different from plucking a piece of fruit off a tree. His cruelty knew no bounds. He was a god who stood in the heavens just like Kyougoku and Detective Ayatsuji.

"If you want to shoot me, Sakaguchi, then do it." The detective's voice was absolutely quiet. "I lost to Kyougoku. Our match ended three months ago when he fell off this cliff. If he wishes for me to die, then there is nothing I can do to stop that from happening."

I managed to lift my head and look in the direction of the voice.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Detective Ayatsuji standing perfectly still in front of the waterfall. Soon enough, I also saw Sakaguchi slowly approaching him with his gun at the ready.

The detective was surrounded by armed Special Forces with the waterfall behind him. There was nowhere left to run.

If they were ordinary police officers, Detective Ayatsuji would probably be able to talk his way out of this. But that wasn't going to work on Sakaguchi and the Division.

"I included my thoughts on this case in a report hidden in my office. Make sure to give it a read once I'm dead."

Sakaguchi's expression showed a brief moment of hesitation when he heard those quiet words.

"Thank you...for everything you've done."

His gun was aimed right at the detective's head.

Detective Ayatsuji wasn't even wearing a bulletproof vest. Even if he was, that wouldn't protect him from a gunshot to the head.

"Stop... Stop!" My throat felt like it was on fire. My entire body was in pain. "I understand we have rules, but please...!"

Sakaguchi took aim, not even seven feet away from his target. There was no



way he could miss.

“Detective Ayatsuji,” Sakaguchi muttered while closing his eyes. “Job well done.”

When Detective Ayatsuji directed his gaze to me, our eyes met...and that was the first time I had ever seen him smile at me.

He opened his mouth as if he was trying to tell me something—

Three shots.

His head flew back, knocking him off-balance until he fell off the cliffside and into the waterfall basin.

Not a single sound could reach my ears.

My soul was crying.

Almost unconsciously, I grabbed the arm of the Special Forces soldier holding me down and twisted it in the opposite direction, weakening his grip and allowing me to take off sprinting.

“Detective Ayatsuji!”

*Why?*

*Why? Why? Why?*

*Why did this have to happen?*

I sprinted down the mountain path by the cliff while the world before me flashed red and white. I couldn’t think. Every muscle in my body carried me forward with unbelievable power.

*Why? Why did the detective...? And for someone like me...?*

The waterfall basin was roaring violently as a faint mist rose into the air. It was as if I’d ended up in another world. I couldn’t find the detective like this, let alone get near the water.

I thought back to the report on Kyougoku three months ago. This waterfall basin was extremely dangerous, and *there was no way to survive a fall.*

“This can’t...be happening...”

This piercing sensation from my head to the tip of my toes burned every last cell in my body. The realization that *the detective died in order to protect me...* was too much to bear. Soon enough, I could hear a few sets of footsteps surrounding me.

“Any traces of the skill user or any accomplices?”

“No.”

I could hear Sakaguchi in the background giving the Special Forces orders, but I was processing none of it.

“Finding a body in this darkness would be difficult. Let’s keep cautious and continue the search tomorrow morning.”

I didn’t even turn around. I simply continued to stare idly at the water basin.

Why? Why did Detective Ayatsuji protect me?

None of this would have ever happened if he had just told them that I was Kubo’s murderer. He would have still been alive.

Why did he save me?

My heart was screaming. I knew the answer, and yet I couldn’t wrap my head around it.

It was almost abrupt. A single question came to me as if a burning fire had been ignited inside me before bursting out of my head.

*Who did this to Detective Ayatsuji?*

“Tsujimura.”

I heard Sakaguchi’s voice in the background.

“We’re done here. Return to headquarters.”

I didn’t reply.

“Tsujimura.”

I looked back at him. “This doesn’t make sense.”

“Tsujimura...”

“It doesn’t add up. It doesn’t make any sense.” My voice was flat, robotic.

“Think about it, Sakaguchi. How was Kyougoku able to pull this off? How was he able to prepare all this before he died three months ago? He had to have done it. There’s no other way to explain what happened.”

I felt my mind convulsing, and I couldn’t stop the words from flowing out of my mouth. It was as if my brain were on fire.

“Kubo genuinely thought he could escape, and yet he died. The date and time he got on that ship, the date and time of those Port Mafia thugs’ side deal, the timing of the drawbridge automatically opening and closing—somebody had to make sure that all three of these things happened at the right time, or they would have never been able to make the perfect trap to defeat Detective Ayatsuji. But if it wasn’t Kubo who did it...then who? Somebody had to be fine-tuning this trap of Kyougoku’s to make sure it worked exactly as planned.”

“That’s...” Sakaguchi seemed to be reflecting on my question. “Of course, it is possible that Kyougoku made this extremely elaborate plan where he somehow perfectly timed all this before he died. But even if he could predict when Kubo would escape and when the drawbridge would rise, trying to pinpoint the exact date and time of that Port Mafia side deal at least three months in advance seems extremely unrealistic. Wouldn’t you agree? Even if he could control someone with the teachings of his wells, the plan had too many moving parts. Would Kyougoku really come up with a scheme that had this much uncertainty? A scheme this important to him?”

Someone was speaking inside me.

I was just an ordinary person, not even remotely anywhere on Kyougoku’s or Detective Ayatsuji’s level. But even then, I had watched the detective solve cases countless times by his side, and right now, that experience was borrowing both my brain and my mouth in order to say something significant.

*This case...*

“Someone was helping Kyougoku,” I announced. “Kyougoku has a pawn working for him, and they’re close by. Somebody was taking care of these wells and spreading the rumors. Someone was keeping up with every step of the investigation and loyally following Kyougoku’s commands, and they were adjusting this scheme while somehow predicting everything we would do.

Someone had taken over this ‘ceremony’ for Kyougoku after his death.”

What were these people called again?

*Oh, right. “Familiars.”*

Kubo wasn’t Kyougoku’s familiar, because he wasn’t aware of the whole picture. He was merely a pawn.

*So who was the familiar—?*

“Not another word, Tsujimura.”

All of a sudden, I heard gunfire, followed by a burning pain in my thigh. I let out a voiceless scream and started to fall forward.

“Gah...!”

The only reason I didn’t collapse to the ground was because someone had violently grabbed me by the wrist from behind.

“Sakaguchi, put down your weapon. I don’t want to kill anyone I don’t have to.”

The voice was so close behind me that I could feel the vibrations on my twisted wrist.

“Wh-what...? Why?”

All I could see was red as my entire body was signaling an alarm. Although the voice was faint, it sounded familiar.

“His ceremony isn’t over yet.”

Unable to move my head, I was limited to what I could see around me.

“Why...?” I said. “Why would you...?”

A pistol was placed against my left temple, and I could feel the person behind me.

“I don’t want to do this, either, Tsujimura. But I’ve got no other choice.”

I grabbed my throbbing wound. I still couldn’t believe what was happening. My mind was a storm of agony and confusion. I couldn’t process the situation, but even then, I still managed to say:

“Why would you do this?! Kyougoku killed your partner! So why?! Answer me, Asukai!”

Inspector Asukai, a high-ranking investigator with the military police, had his gun to my head. This tough agent, who so relentlessly pursued Kyougoku, was behind me.

“I’m scared, too,” he whispered in my ear. His voice—it was trembling. “That’s why I didn’t do anything until the detective was dead... You get it, right?”

“Get...what?” My voice was also trembling.

“The time has come, Tsujimura... This way.”

Asukai pulled me back. His hand was gripping me so tight that I couldn’t even attempt to free myself. He continued walking backward, dragging me with him...to the waterfall basin.

*What’s he trying to do?*

My thoughts were a mess.

*Why? Why would Asukai...?*

He’d been after Kyougoku all this time. He despised Kyougoku and wanted revenge for his partner. And he had helped Detective Ayatsuji and me on several occasions throughout our investigation. During the car chase at the harbor, he got in my Aston Martin and nearly died when the Port Mafia shot at us in pursuit. If he really was the one behind Kyougoku’s crimes, then—

*Wait.*

*Was it...the other way around?*

Asukai was there when we were attacked at the sewage treatment plant. Our rendezvous was top secret; I took special care in selecting that location to keep anyone from finding out.

But it would’ve been extremely difficult for Asukai to time it so that my car was on the drawbridge at just the right moment. The entire plan would have been ruined if I’d crossed the bridge before the crates had been put in place.

*“Tsujimura, look! That’s his car!”*

*“Tsuji-mura! That’s his car! It’s on that ship!”*

Had he been leading me to where he wanted me to go?

“Now that Detective Ayatsuji’s dead, we can finally move on to the final stage of the ceremony,” Asukai said calmly from behind me. “The ceremony, by the way, is a sequence of instructions given to me—and this is the last step.”

He placed the gun against my head.

Thinking back, he would have been able to hide Kyougoku’s corpse, too. But why would someone with such a strong sense of justice do that?

“Asukai, don’t tell me—” I managed to push through the pain and spit out a few words. “Did he... Did he possess you with an evil spirit?”

“No, I’m not possessed by any spirit. I’m doing all this of my own volition. I fought ‘him’ once. When I was assigned to his case. But I soon learned that he’d gone far beyond the realms of what was humanly possible. And there’s no way a human can defeat a phantom.”

A phantom—Kyougoku. He’d made me the criminal behind Kubo’s murder and set Detective Ayatsuji up to kill him.

“What do you think people have done since time immemorial when they’re faced with something beyond human understanding? Let me tell you, Tsuji-mura. They fear and worship these beings. They give offerings and prayers so that these greater existences don’t reduce them to ashes on a whim. There’s nothing else they can do.”

I got a glimpse of Asukai’s pistol after I managed to move my head enough.

“And that’s why I did exactly that...just like I did *five years ago*.”

I noticed something strange out of the corner of my eye.

Asukai always wore leather gloves—but he wasn’t wearing them now. Under the light of the moon, I saw an old white scar on one of his pale fingers. It wrapped around the entire finger. The scar was so faint that I never would’ve noticed it unless I was this close to him.

That old scar—it almost looked like the tip of his finger had been chopped off.

He was missing...part of his *left ring finger*.

“No...,” I moaned. “You can’t be...!”

I thought back to Kubo, who’d admitted he was behind the Reigo Island Massacre. But there wasn’t any actual objective evidence to prove it.

“Let her go, Inspector Asukai,” Sakaguchi demanded with his gun drawn.

Asukai, meanwhile, was hiding right behind me and using me as a shield. I couldn’t possibly fend him off with the gunshot wound to my leg.

“I don’t plan on getting out of here alive, Sakaguchi,” Asukai avowed in a quiet voice. “The three of us—me, Detective Ayatsuji, and Tsujimura—will make this our final resting place. Only then will the Shrine of Malevolence be complete. That is his Word—the Word of the unrelenting phantom who devours all who pursue him. He grants evil to the faithful who worship him. Tales of him will proliferate and continue to live on in this country nearly forever. This is what the man who *couldn’t pass on his genes* wanted.”

I grunted as we retreated into the numbingly frigid basin.

“Come,” he said. “It’ll all be over soon.”

Asukai took another step back. We were already waist-deep in the water and close enough for the powerful roar of the falls to rock our heads. I heard a *click* near my ear.

“Farewell.”

It was the sound of the end.

*So this is where it ends...*

I never got to ask about my mother. Detective Ayatsuji had thrown his life away to protect mine, and I wasted it.

“Mom...” The word instinctively slipped off my tongue. “Somebody... Help...”

I felt a gun pressed against my temple.

“Save me...”

I couldn’t stop the words from flowing. I’d lost a ton of blood, and I was starting to fade in and out of consciousness. I no longer had any idea what I was

saying.

“Mom... Help... Detective... Help me.....”

Warmth gradually escaped my body.

Slowly, I was enveloped in death’s embrace...

“‘Help me’? Spoken like a true top-class agent, Tsujimura.”

I was hearing things. Hallucinating.

There was no way that voice was real.

Because...

Because that voice...

“The same goes for you, too, Asukai. The moment I died, you immediately started giving yourself away... It looks like nobody but Kyougoku can even give me a *challenge*.”

“What...?!”

Asukai tried to turn around and point his gun in the direction of the voice, but his arm froze as if by some sort of invisible force.

“I figured out Kubo wasn’t the Engineer when I met him. No one that inarticulate could have possibly instigated seventeen people to commit murder. It had to be someone more persuasive—for instance, someone with governmental authority, like a military police investigator.”

There he was.

A tall, shadowy figure dripping wet from the waterfall.

His skin was pale like a doll’s, his eyes bitterly cold as if all the life had been robbed from him.

His entire body emitted a chill icy enough to scare off even a cold-blooded snake.

“Detective...Ayatsuji...?!”

He wasn’t dead.

He was alive.



But how—?

“If dying and coming back to life was Kyougoku’s forte,” Detective Ayatsuji began, narrowing his eyes, “then I figured I was just going to have to beat him at his own game.”

“What the—?! My gun... I can’t move my arm...!”

Asukai grabbed his arm. It was as if his hand had been stapled in place in midair even though no one was touching him.

“I obtained a confession. Now I have everything I need.” The detective, soaking wet, exhaled a glacial breath. “There’s no reason for me to be dead anymore.”

“This can’t be! Detective Ayatsuji...you *have* to die! Because otherwise, Tsujimura is going to die!”

“You’re right. But it’s already too late.” The detective cast a serpentine glance my way. “Can’t you tell? Death—a fate-defying death—is coming for Kubo’s murderer as we speak. Watch.”

I instantly began to tremble.

*The one who killed Kubo...*

*The person who ran over the wooden crate he was in and killed him...*

I suddenly noticed something crawling around my feet, so I looked down at the water.

Something was struggling, and its shrieks sounded like metal being twisted. I peered deeper into the water.

An intangible black beast—it was the Shadow Child, contorting violently as if it was being broken apart piece by piece.

“*That’s* who killed Kubo,” Detective Ayatsuji quietly revealed. “Kubo was run over by a car. But before he drew his last breath, the Shadow Child slipped into his crate and slashed his neck. Why? Because that was what it was ordered to do. Its late master—the true owner of that skill—ordered it to *murder anyone Tsujimura tries to kill.*”

I thought back to our fight against the special task force in the sewage treatment plant.

Back then, I had my gun drawn on one of the officers who was aiming his gun back at me, and I wasn't in any position to go easy on him. I had to fire my weapon even if that meant taking his life. And if I did pull the trigger, the bullet would have hit him right in the face, either killing him instantly or, at the very least, leaving him critically injured.

But I never got to pull the trigger.

Before I could even try, the Shadow Child stabbed him in the chest.

I trembled.

Kubo's body had been torn up and badly beaten. It was obvious that most of his wounds were from getting hit by a car. But no one would have noticed a laceration from a scythe among his many injuries. If he'd received all those wounds around the same time, then even an official autopsy wouldn't be able to determine exactly which one had killed him.

The Shadow Child.

The cursed skill my mother left me.

But...this meant that the Shadow Child knew in advance that this was going to happen...right...?

"The Shadow Child isn't Tsujimura's skill," the detective revealed. "Its true skill user died five years ago, but the skill lived on and continued upholding its orders and protecting Tsujimura—all for its late master's daughter."

*Hang on. Then my mother—*

"Anyway, I've kept you waiting too long, Asukai." Detective Ayatsuji slowly began to walk. "It's your turn."

"W-wait! Detective, I still—!"

"That's the reaction I wanted to see." The detective smiled, and cold air escaped his slightly parted lips. "You knew this day would come, Asukai, ever since you orchestrated all those murders on Reigo Island as the Engineer. Or maybe you figured it out even earlier...like when you *slaughtered your partner*

per Kyougoku's orders."

Asukai couldn't fight it. He lifted the gun against his own will. He tried to push it down with his other hand, but it continued to move as if it had a mind of its own...until it was pointing at Asukai himself.

"Y-you...you can't k-kill me yet!" Asukai shouted, his voice trembling. "I—I still have information on Kyougoku's scheme that—"

"I don't need it."

The detective faintly smirked. It was a soul-sucking grin, one chilling enough to rival a demon's.

*The cold-blooded reaper...*

Asukai pressed the muzzle against his own chin.

"Bon appétit," said Detective Ayatsuji.

After Asukai's mouth automatically opened, he shoved the muzzle of his gun inside. His eyes opened wide with fear he'd never felt before. However, Detective Ayatsuji stood before Asukai and gazed at the horrific scene as if he was amused.

"Farewell, Inspector Asukai. You were an exceptional agent...and a piece of shit leagues more disgusting than even a cesspit of dead maggots. You're no Kyougoku, though. That's for sure. Do society a favor and die. Quickly, before that filthy face and breath of yours rot any more brains."

"Gfff...!"

But before Asukai could say another word, a flash of light erupted in his mouth.

The shot blew off chunks of flesh.

The hollow-point bullet bore a hole through the bones in his throat, shattering them as it expanded into the skull on impact.

Once the bullet scrambled the motor center of his brain, Asukai's entire body involuntarily began to convulse, including the tip of his finger, causing him to continue to pull the trigger multiple times against his will. Each bullet removed

a different piece of flesh, shattering through bone until blood was spewing out of every hole on his face while he screamed. Ligaments, muscle, and pieces of brain shot into the air, and blood and brain fluid flew back.

Detective Ayatsuji just watched, unblinking.

It wasn't long until there wasn't even a single bullet left. And yet, Asukai's trembling finger continued to pull the trigger. Then it was over. He was gone. With less than half of his face remaining, a flutelike whistle escaped what was left of his throat, and his head tipped backward.

His death was followed by a deep silence.

"Rest in peace."

The detective patted Asukai's blood-covered shoulder a few times and slowly pushed the corpse into the water. There was a faint *splash* before it sank to the bottom.

Nobody in the Division—not a single one of these seasoned soldiers—could utter a word.

The Homicide Detective.

The unbelievable power and unnaturalness of this skill was too much to handle. Everyone stood in silence, unable to even lift a finger.

"...Detective Ayatsuji," muttered a shadow—Sakaguchi in his typically cynical voice. "For the last time...we can't have you going rogue like this. I had no idea that Tsujimura was behind Kubo's murder, and I didn't know that the Shadow Child had been ordered to kill Tsujimura's enemies, either."

"I gave you more than enough information to work with, Sakaguchi," the detective replied in his usual tone. "I told you to shoot me with nonlethal rubber bullets. I asked you to hide a net inside the waterfall for me to grab onto and climb down. I even said to act like you'd really killed me so that the actual criminal would let his guard down. What else did you need to know?"

A few seconds went by. I blankly stared back and forth between the two men until it finally hit me.

They were on the same page. This was their plan from the very beginning.

They had to make Kyougoku's familiar think that Detective Ayatsuji was dead in order to throw the familiar off. The detective must have gotten in touch with Sakaguchi secretly to tell him the plan.

"Are you kidding me?!" I shouted despite myself. "This isn't fair! How could you do something so awful?! Would it have killed you to tell me the truth beforehand?!"

"Sakaguchi, you heard the lady. Tell her."

Detective Ayatsuji shot Sakaguchi a glance as if he couldn't be bothered to answer.

"Tsuji-mura, we couldn't tell you because you're too easy to read," my boss bluntly replied with a blank expression.

*What jerks! Both of them!*

"It was relatively easy to guess that somebody within the police had been infected by Kyougoku's folie à deux," Detective Ayatsuji explained. "Only someone who'd been involved in the investigation could have taken Kyougoku's corpse from the waterfall basin. We didn't have any proof, though, so I had to get Sakaguchi to pretend to kill me. I knew that Kyougoku's familiar would make a move once he believed he didn't have to worry about my skill anymore."

"But..." I tried to argue with him. "Did you know...Asukai was the Engineer?"

"I figured it out during the investigation." Detective Ayatsuji shrugged. "I realized immediately that Kubo didn't have what it took to be the Engineer, but Kubo genuinely believed he'd done all that. Therefore, it was only reasonable to assume that the *real* Engineer was trying to pin his crimes on Kubo and that Kubo was given false memories."

"False memories'...?"

"Kubo apparently used to hallucinate—he mentioned that he'd seen a monkey. That was probably Kyougoku's skill at work; Kubo must have been possessed by a *satori*, an evil monkey spirit."

A satori?

"I've heard of those before," Sakaguchi mentioned. "I believe they're mind-

mountain-dwelling monsters that can read minds.”

I stared blankly at them.

*Am I the only one here who isn't an expert on ghosts and folklore?*

“Exactly. But those weren't Kubo's memories—they were Asukai's. The *satori* peered into Kubo's thoughts and memories for so long that Kubo began to believe that he actually was the Engineer behind the Reigo Island Massacre. But, well, he thought he was special until the very end, so I guess he died a happy man.”

I thought back to Kubo's arrogant demeanor at the train station.

He truly believed that being ostracized from society for committing murder was proof that he was special. He was convinced that evil was the easiest way to keep himself from being crushed by society. That must've been why Kyougoku had chosen him.

Grant evil and save the individual—that was what Kyougoku was trying to do with that well.

“At any rate... This case gave me quite a fright.” Sakaguchi sighed. “Detective Ayatsuji, you'll be coming with me to explain things to the director later, because I refuse to listen to him complain all by myself.”

Sakaguchi looked exhausted. He ordered the Special Forces to return to their vehicles. I quietly watched them leave.

“Detective,” I muttered, shifting my gaze toward Detective Ayatsuji. “I just... Thank you.”

He stared down at me, showing almost no concern or even interest.

“For what?” he asked.

“For... You know? For that. Like...” I began searching for the right words. “The reason why...you ignored Division orders and ran away...was because—because I...”

He raised an eyebrow. “Spit it out already. What are you getting at?”

“You know—because...for me...you, like...” My face gradually started to get

warmer. “Oh! Is this what I think it is? You know what I’m trying to say, but you’re trying to get me to say it myself, aren’t you?”

“I get you’re trying to imply something...” The detective shot me a quizzical look. “But I have no idea what you’re trying to say.”

“Seriously?!”

*Why does he always suddenly become dense during times like this?!*

“You ran away because you didn’t want me to die, right? I’m just...really happy, okay?! So I wanted to thank you! That’s it!”

A faint smirk instantly played on his lips. “Heh. Honesty is the best policy,” the detective smugly replied with a nod. “By the way, I knew that the real killer was the Shadow Child from the very beginning. I only made it look like the government was after me so that Asukai would let his guard down. In other words, running away to save your life never once crossed my mind. Do you honestly think anyone would do something like that for *you*?”

My soul immediately left my body.

“Huh...?”

I started feeling hot, and I shook uncontrollably.

“Sheesh... You still need a lot of work. For starters, a good servant wouldn’t even hesitate to say thank you.” Detective Ayatsuji tilted his head to the side. “Training starts tomorrow.”

“Excuse me?!”

I swung my fist without a second thought, but he nimbly dodged it. He must have seen it coming from a mile away.

“It’s *my* job to keep an eye on you! Not the other way around!” I shouted.

“Which is exactly why you need training. My work would be so much easier if I had a watchdog that was actually obedient and disciplined.”

“How about I throw you off that cliff again?!”

I lunged at him in a fit of rage, but the agonizing pain in my thigh stopped me dead in my tracks. I started to fall forward...only to be caught in his long arms.

“...You’re an idiot,” Detective Ayatsuji griped. “Let me take you to the hospital. I want my servant in perfect health before she comes back to work.”

“I told you... I’m not...your servant—”

“I’ve made up my mind,” he said abruptly with his arm wrapped under mine. “You promised to do anything I wanted for an entire day, right? Well, that day is tomorrow.”

“Hey?! I’m badly injured, y’know!”

“Which means you’ll be more obedient.”

His mouth curled into a smug grin, and he started to help me walk.

*The nerve of this guy! I’m gonna shoot him in his stupid face for real next time!*



## EPILOGUE

### Ayatsuji Detective Agency Morning Clear

Two weeks had gone by since then.

There was no longer a visible hole in my thigh, and I had returned to work even as I was convalescing. Meanwhile, Sakaguchi had been busier than ever following the Kyougoku incident, from being swamped with paperwork, going toe to toe against Ministry of Justice top brass, and dealing with a foreign skill organization in Yokohama.

Detective Ayatsuji, on the other hand, was now being called “The Master of Escape,” and the surveillance team keeping an eye on him increased twofold. Nevertheless, he still disappeared from time to time, only to return with new dolls for his collection. To say the Division was absolutely stunned would be an understatement.

Investigations into Kyougoku remained ongoing, but strangely enough, new cases that appeared to be Kyougoku’s doing kept cropping up occasionally. A major reorganization within the military police brought on newly appointed special agents who groused that it felt as if Kyougoku were still alive. Kyougoku’s body, which Asukai had hidden, still hadn’t been found yet, either. Perhaps Kyougoku *was* still alive out there somewhere. The thought alone sent a chill down my spine.

After all, who knew what that phantom was capable of?

And as for me—

“Detective Ayatsuji! Did you see this magazine article?!” I shouted the instant I walked into the detective agency.

Detective Ayatsuji, who was sipping a cup of coffee, eyed me lethargically. “Do you know what time it is, Tsujimura? What’s gotten you so excited? Did you

finally learn how to tie your shoes?”

“Look at this!” I slammed a tabloid onto his desk. “SPOOKY! SORCERER’S GHOST TEMPTING PEOPLE TO DO EVIL!”

The detective calmly read the headline. “I’m already getting a headache. Who wrote this?”

“The same guy who wrote about the well,” I replied.

I then began reading parts of the article to him.

There’s been no shortage of bizarre statements made by murder suspects lately. A restaurant owner who tainted his customers’ plates with lethal poison claimed that a demon tempted him to do it while he was on a business trip in the mountains. A woman who chopped off her boyfriend’s arms and legs said she had forged a pact with a demon that was standing at the end of a crossroad.

“I’m going to skip ahead a little, okay?” I said as I turned the page.

The one thing these suspects have in common is their claim that a demon taught them how to commit the perfect crime. Word has it that a wicked sorcerer has come back from the dead with a grudge against the detective who exposed his crimes and had him killed, and now he persuades others to do his evil bidding. If this story wasn’t already terrifying enough, there are hair-raising rumors of people searching for ways to become possessed by this ghost so that they can act on grudges of their own. Personally, I can’t even fathom how sick in the head someone must be to want to commit murder. At any rate, people claim to have seen this ghost at a place known as the Haunted Kyougoku Crossroad, which I plan to investigate further—

“Journalism at its finest.” Detective Ayatsuji scowled. “He writes like he’s some sort of hero, but all he’s doing is giving wannabe murderers that last push they need to follow their dreams. ‘The road to hell is paved with good intentions,’ as they say.”

“I spoke with the journalist earlier, and he basically regurgitated the same stories in this article. He apparently got this scoop from interviewing city and military police agents who were involved in the Kyougoku case.” I sighed. “Want

to use the long arm of the law to get these tabloids off the street?”

“It’d be a waste of time.” Detective Ayatsuji took a sip of coffee as if he wasn’t concerned. “Other tabloids will flood the market soon enough. There’s no way to stop the rumors. It seems the tales of this ‘ghost’ have begun to spread just like he wanted.”

This ghost had been appearing at the Haunted Kyougoku Crossroad and granting evil to those who found it.

Kyougoku had won, just like the detective had said himself countless times.

We lost the moment Detective Ayatsuji killed him at the top of the waterfall three and a half months ago. The events that played out afterward were merely throwaway matches that let the defeat really sink in and make us suffer even more.

In order to put a stop to this madness, we needed to prove that Kyougoku was just an ordinary person, but that wasn’t possible now that he was dead.

Kyougoku’s death was most likely the final stroke of the pen necessary to complete his so-called ceremony.

“There are numerous cases of humans becoming monsters or spirits,” Detective Ayatsuji said, his expression unchanged. “The Hashihime of Uji in *The Tale of the Heike’s* ‘Book of the Sword’ tells of a noblewoman so consumed by jealousy of another woman that she spent seven days at Kifune Shrine praying to become a demonic entity. The deity Kifune then instructed her to take on a monstrous form and submerge herself in the Kawase River in Uji for twenty-one days. The woman fashioned her long hair into five horns, covered her face with cinnabar and her body with vermilion, then crowned her head with a three-pronged trivet and set it in three torches of burning pine along with two further torches in her mouth. After twenty-one days in the river, she became a demon who haunted the people she envied to their deaths.”

Detective Ayatsuji effortlessly recited all this with his eyes closed. He basically had a photographic memory when it came to books.

“There’s one record from the Tenpyo-hoji era—specifically, the year 757, when the spirit of Tachibana no Naramaro, who died in prison, spread baseless

rumors that ended up inciting a riot. Then in March of the third year of the Hoki era—the year 772—Princess Inoe was accused of putting a curse on the emperor, and both she and her son, Imperial Prince Osabe, were stripped of their titles in May of the same year. Once the two of them died under mysterious circumstances three years later, strange things started occurring within the imperial court. There's also the well-known tale of Sugawara no Michizane. After his death in 903, he was said to have become an unruly god of storms. Multiple rainstorms and floods later, the imperial court built Kitano Tenmangu and dedicated it him. Nowadays, people know him as a god of learning."

"They die, they become demons, they wreak havoc, and eventually, people start to worship them until they become gods..." I said.

"Gods and demons are intrinsically equals in this country. Like beneficial insects and harmful insects."

Maybe Kyougoku would someday come to be worshipped as a god, too. A malevolent god who provided salvation for the lonely through evil and crime. Before long, tales of him would turn into legends and eventually ghost stories.

This was Kyougoku we were talking about, after all. He might still be scheming unbeknownst to us, dispatching familiars and carrying out his plan to become a ghastly specter.

I could hear his gleeful cackle even now.

"By the way..." I lifted my head and asked, "Do you still see Kyougoku's spirit sometimes?"

I glanced around the room. It was just me and the detective here, of course, but that didn't mean *he* wasn't here, too.

"Yeah." Detective Ayatsuji narrowed his eyes and looked toward the back of the room. "He's right over there."

I instinctively followed his gaze, but there was obviously nobody there. Just darkness, a gentle breeze, and silence.

"Detective," I began, staring at the empty space. "The Division can probably exorcise this demon possessing you. If you want them to get rid of Kyougoku for

good—”

“I wish we could, but unfortunately, we can’t.” He scowled. “He may be nothing more than a shadow without a mind or body, but he still knows things that we don’t. He still has Kyougoku’s knowledge before he died. He even reveals the truth behind past murders on a whim sometimes, just to mess with me. So until we get enough information on the other wells and unsolved mysteries, I’m stuck with this aggravating parasite.”

“Then...there’s something I want you to ask him for me.”

“What’s that?”

“Why did he choose you and me?” I said. “I understand that he needed players in his scheme to solve those cases and spread rumors for his ‘ceremony,’ but why did those two people need to be us? There must’ve been plenty of other detectives and agents with skills out there.”

“Beats me,” Detective Ayatsuji replied, leaning back in his seat. Then his expression almost immediately changed. “...What?”

He peered into the corner of the room as if he was closely observing something.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Kyougoku says that’s not all.” Ayatsuji paused. “Come on... Are you messing with me?”

*What else is there...?*

I felt a sudden surge of anxiety. “What did Kyougoku say?”

“No...” Detective Ayatsuji shook his head and averted his gaze. “Don’t worry about it. He’s either lying or joking.”

I cocked my head, curious. *“That’s not all”? Is there another reason Kyougoku got us involved in all this? One we still don’t know about?*

Detective Ayatsuji stared daggers at one corner of the room. “Shut up, Kyougoku. Whatever. I don’t have time to waste on someone who’s already dead, so get out of here. And stop watching me while I sleep like you did this morning. If I wake up and see you a foot away from my face again, I’m

exorcising you myself.”

He then threw the spoon in his hand at the corner of the room. It just bounced off the wall and fell to the floor.

“You’re starting to look...,” I began, “...insane.”

At my off-the-cuff remark, Detective Ayatsuji slowly turned his head in my direction...and smiled.

“...Tsuji-mura.” His voice would have even shaken the deepest bowels of hell. “It sounds to me like you forgot all your ‘training’ while you were in the hospital. Shall we start from the beginning again?”

I blacked out, and by the time I regained consciousness, I was prostrating myself on the floor against my better judgment.

“P-please... Anything but that.” My entire body was trembling. “N-no more training, please... I beg of you! Anything but that! Please...!”

“Hmph.” Detective Ayatsuji stood up and glared icily at me. “As long as you know your place, we’re good. Now, let’s go, Tsuji-mura. Bring the car around.”

“...Huh?” I lifted my head. “Where are we going?”

“I’ve been summoned,” the detective replied while placing his pipe between his lips. “Your people want me at their secret base.”

\*

Ayatsuji entered the Special Division for Unusual Power’s base alone. A certain hallway in the building—which appeared to be nothing more than a countryside library—led him to an empty closed-stack library.

After he placed a hand on an old white wall and twisted his wrist, the wall lowered, creating a path even farther into the building.

Once he got past the monitoring systems, voice-recognition device, and retina scanner, he walked through a heavily guarded checkpoint, received permission to pass, and started heading underground.

At the end of the dimly lit, spacious hallway was a massive aluminum door, which silently opened, revealing a colossal underground white library that was far more impressive than the fake one above. The ceiling seemed almost

endlessly high, and the room was so big that he couldn't even clearly see the wall on the opposite side. Silvery-white bookshelves stood like ceremonial guards, stuffed with valuable books from all over the world.

It was a land full of time, paper, and silence.

Ayatsuji observed his surroundings. Near the entrance was a large desk where a woman was sitting alone, reading.

She had a quiet demeanor and seemed to be around forty to fifty years old. She was in a pale-blue knit sweater and wore a simple hairband to hold back her black hair, which was accented by strands of silver. The woman didn't have on any jewelry or other accessories. Her light-colored eyes carefully traced each word she read.

Only the sound of her turning pages filled the silent library. However, each page turned only made the silence stand out even more. She was like time and knowledge compressed into a single person.

Ayatsuji took the seat across from her, but neither of them said so much as a word for a while. The turning pages of the book sounded like the booming of ocean waves.

"How about going outside every once in a while, Director?" Ayatsuji asked.

"What's wrong with here?" the woman replied while keeping her eyes glued to her book. "By the way, Ayatsuji, I'm the *assistant* director. I know I'm never on center stage, so it must be easy to forget."

"Right, You're the real boss of the Special Division, the one who pulls the strings from the shadows."

The assistant director lifted her head and smiled. "I see you're still just as outspoken after all these years."

"Five years, to be exact." Ayatsuji's smile was so faint that it almost seemed nonexistent. "Did you summon me here just to hear my hot takes? Because you could have called me ages ago if you simply wanted to hear my voice."

"You know I can't do that." The assistant director softly combed her hair back, revealing a small, old scar on her right ear. "Only a few people know that I'm

even alive. How would the public feel if they saw a woman who was supposed to be dead strolling down the street? It would give them a heart attack, right?”

“Yeah.” Ayatsuji nodded.

“You’re absolutely right, Assistant Director Tsujimura,” he added.

The woman gently smiled at him with a quiet gaze, then carefully closed her book and asked:

“How’s my daughter?”

Her voice shook the spacious library, emphasizing its silence even further.

“As reckless as always.” Ayatsuji shook his head. “She’s planning on pooling her savings and next paycheck to buy a bulletproof SUV with a four-wheel drive. You know, the kind with a machine gun installed in the back seat. I heard her huffing and puffing about how she was going to ‘get them good next time’ or something like that.”

“Sounds like you’ve got your hands full.” The woman’s smile deepened even more. “But I feel safe leaving her with you.”

“Right. I plan on making her my maid, by the way.”

“No, you don’t.”

Ayatsuji inhaled as if he was going to say something but instead quietly exhaled, keeping whatever thought he had to himself. He looked into the distance for a while; once again, silence returned. It was like sand slowly blowing in the desert wind.

“Sorry for crushing the Shadow Child,” he abruptly said, still gazing into the distance.

“Don’t be. That was its mission, after all.” She shook her head. “It’s not an issue, regardless. Autonomous skill-derived life-forms grow back to their usual size after a few years.”

“A Port Mafia executive said something curious to your daughter,” the detective mentioned as he observed the white desk’s design. “He told her the Shadow Child reeked of death.”



The woman didn't reply immediately, staring quietly at him.

"I guess it makes sense, though," the detective added. "You and the Shadow Child have slaughtered countless criminals and foreign spies with skills, after all. You are a specialist in skill-based combat—a true agent like the film heroes that your daughter so aspires to be."

"Yes..." The woman quietly nodded. "But people like that don't last long."

"True, you made too many enemies for yourself, so you had to go into hiding. And that's why *in return for sparing my life*, you asked me to help you fake your death. So I went to Reigo Island during those murders and made it look like my skill had killed you in an accident. I never expected your daughter would find me while trying to unravel the mystery, though."

"She may not look it, but she's stubborn. Once she's made up her mind, she doesn't give up." The assistant director smiled.

"Heh. Yeah, 'stubborn' is a nice way of putting it," the detective scoffed. "She really takes after you."

Assistant Director Tsujimura beamed from ear to ear.

"You being alive really helped me solve this case, by the way," Ayatsuji added. "The moment Kubo said you were dead, I realized that he wasn't the Engineer. He probably confused the records of the incident with his actual memories after the *satori* altered them."

"I'm glad I could help." The assistant director bitterly smirked. "Since we're already talking about the case, how about you explain something to me? Kyougoku needed a detective for his plan to succeed, but why did he end up choosing you and my daughter?"

"That's..."

Ayatsuji hesitated; he seemed to be thinking about something.

It was the same question that Agent Tsujimura asked him earlier—a question that he hadn't been able to bring himself to answer.

The detective stared at the woman in front of him, who carefully gazed back at him with eyes that saw all. But eventually, he sighed in acquiescence and

started the tale.

“In general, there are rules to where a ghost or monster can appear,” he began. “They have to be places where everyday life crosses with the spirit world: wells, bridges, the foot of a mountain...and crossroads where paths literally cross one another.” The detective folded his hands together over the table. “One Buddhist event was merged with an old Japanese custom to create what we know nowadays as *Obon*, where we honor the spirits of our ancestors. Since ancient times, people have believed that offering incense at graves in their village or at crossroads allowed their ancestors’ spirits to return to this world. There’s also a long custom of performing the traditional *Obon* dance in the center of the village—in other words, at the center of the crossroad. In some regions, whenever there’s a funeral, people will pierce white pieces of paper with bamboo sticks and shove them into village crossroads. This way, people in the village knew a funeral had taken place. All this to say: Crossroads in ancient times were considered boundaries between this world and the next, at least subconsciously.”

Assistant Director Tsujimura nodded quietly. “I understand that much, but go on.”

“In the *Kyuuai Zuihitsu*, the crossroad—or the *tsuji*, as they used to call them—to the northeast of the Kyoto Imperial Palace was named the Washbasin Tsuji. A specter rendered anyone passing through it on horseback unable to move. There are also numerous legends of an *ubume*—the evil spirit of a deceased pregnant woman—appearing at a *tsuji* as well. And monsters known as *darashi* are said to appear at a *tsuji* and grab onto anyone who passes by, holding them down until the victim is too exhausted to move. There’s also a wayside shrine by a *tsuji* in Ibaraki and a similar one in Kagoshima. There are even *tsuji* fortune tellers in Sakai. Anyway, you could go on and on for days bringing up ghost stories that involve crossroads. One legend overseas tells of a demon at a crossroad who will grant you whatever you wish in return for your soul.”

The assistant director’s expression suddenly clouded over as if she had come to some sort of realization. Ayatsuji held out a finger to stop her before she could say anything.

“I don’t know if crossroads actually are boundaries between worlds,” he continued, “but I do know that Kyougoku was obsessed with the idea. He wanted to become a demon just like the Hashihime of Uji and Emperor Sutoku, so he became fixated on whatever was needed to make that happen. And what he needed most of all was someone who could serve as the foundation by solving these bizarre mysteries and spreading their rumors to the public. Put simply, he needed a detective to be the phantom’s hunter as well as the source of the phantom’s origin.”

“Hold on,” the assistant director interjected, covering her face with a hand. “Does that mean...the reason why Kyougoku was so obsessed with making you and my daughter his rivals to carry out his final plan was simply because—?”

“Yes,” the detective easily admitted. “My name is *Ayatsuji*, and my assistant’s name is *Tsujimura*. That’s why.”

The assistant director shook her head incredulously. “That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard.”

“Anyway, it was nice talking with you.” Ayatsuji scooted back in his chair and stood up. “I should be heading out. Tsujimura’s waiting for me.”

“Can I ask you one last thing about my daughter?” the woman ventured. “You lied in your report.”

The detective quietly stared back at her for a few moments. “Which lie are you talking about? I’ve lost count.”

Assistant Director Tsujimura gently smiled. “You said that ignoring the Division’s request and running away was all an act. You claimed you only did that to lure out Kyougoku’s ‘familiar.’ Doesn’t that sound a little strange to you?”

Ayatsuji didn’t reply, but his eyes were locked on her face.

“You knew that the Shadow Child was my skill, and you knew that I was still alive.” The assistant director stroked the cover of her book. “But you didn’t know that I’d ordered the Shadow Child to kill anyone my daughter tried to kill. You only knew about that after you were on the run and I contacted you.”

The detective slowly blinked in silence for a few moments. “What are you

trying to say?”

“That you realized my daughter had been set up when you were looking into Kubo’s death, and you ran away so that your skill wouldn’t kill her. You ran, even though you knew the Division would hunt you down. In other words, you were made to choose between *your life* and *my daughter’s*, and you chose *hers*. Am I wrong?”

“...I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Ayatsuji averted his gaze and began to walk away.

“Is that so?” The assistant director laughed. “I thought the fearless Homicide Detective would have been able to come up with a better excuse than that.”

“I don’t have time for your games. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

The detective began heading toward the exit, his footsteps echoing in his wake. But when he placed a hand on the door, Assistant Director Tsujimura stopped him one last time.

“Take good care of my daughter for me.”

Ayatsuji looked back with a faint smirk. “Your precious daughter, who you named after yourself, is safe with me, Assistant Director Mizuki Tsujimura.”

\*

After Ayatsuji exited the library’s back door alone, he squinted under the bright sunlight. A deep silence enveloped the parking lot while Agent Tsujimura waited by the door.

“Detective Ayatsuji! That was quick. Did you meet with someone?”

“I was rekindling an old friendship,” Ayatsuji briefly replied as he continued to walk. “You received word of our next mission?”

“Yes, I just got the call... There’s been a series of bizarre murders.”

Tsujimura followed him, opening her notebook and checking what she wrote.

“From what I was told, all these murders occurred in a building designed by a well-known architect. Someone working there mentioned the Haunted Kyougoku Crossroad as well.”

“So his plan is going smoothly. Sounds like we’re going to have to take care of another one of his adherents.”

After a brief sigh, the detective began to head toward the car, where a familiar individual was standing.

“I have good news,” the individual said with a grin. “Your next destination will be a nightmare. One of my personal favorite serial killers will be waiting for you in a brand-new unescapable room.”

Ayatsuji kept walking to the car without even glancing in Kyougoku’s direction. The Sorcerer decided to lean in closer.

“Nothing has changed,” he told Ayatsuji. “You will be eliminated if you fail to solve the case. If you need any help, you know where to find me. I would never turn down a request from you, after all.”

“Get out of my way.” The detective swung his arm, and Kyougoku instantly vanished.

“Don’t even try. You cannot get rid of a shadow.” Kyougoku was already in the back seat of the car. “I am but a mirage—a figment of your imagination that lives in your head. Now, come. A fresh locked-door mystery awaits us, partner.”

“Who the hell are you calling—?”

But before he could even start yelling, Kyougoku was gone without a trace. Ayatsuji sighed.

Tsujimura turned a worried gaze in his direction. “Detective? Is everything okay?”

“...I’m fine,” he replied. “Tsujimura.”

“Yes?”

The detective looked back at his assistant. She was staring at him curiously with her head tilted to the side, causing her bangs to brush against her cheek.

Ayatsuji reflected on his skill.

It was a curse that spread death around him regardless of his wishes. The moment he gained this skill, he was robbed of the chance to lead an ordinary

life. His world would be soaked with blood and reeking of death. Nothing but sadness and resentment. The only end to this suffering would be his demise.

Too many lives had been ruined and lost during his battle to the death with Kyougoku. Many more would follow. There was no victory in this war against the “evil” that the phantom left behind—and that was why he had to continue fighting this losing battle until he drew his very last breath.

*However...*

Tsujimura gazed at Ayatsuji. Her light-colored eyes were just like her mother's.

*Even then, this makes it all—*

“Forget it. I don't know what's gotten into me. Just start driving.”

“Okay!”

“Safety first.”

“I'll get us there in a jiffy! Hold on tight!”

Ayatsuji shook his head and rolled his eyes.

Even if it meant crawling out of the pits of hell.

Even if it meant being forever surrounded by death.

Even if it meant drowning in conspiracies and resentment...

“Being a detective is worth it all,” he said, then gently smiled.

End

## PAPERBACK EDITION AFTERWORD

Good evening. Kafka Asagiri here.

First, I want to thank everyone for reading this novel.

I would like to use this afterword to explain how this book came about. Honestly, it was nothing short of a miracle, looking back. Pure chance, the stars aligning just right.

It all started with Yukito Ayatsuji writing a comment to promote the second volume of the *Bungo Stray Dogs* manga. My editor said, *“Hey, let’s turn Yukito Ayatsuji into a character from the series, too!”* Therefore, we had Sango Harukawa draw us a beautiful illustration that was included with a backstory for Ayatsuji in the magazine *Young Ace*. The description was as follows:

Yukito Ayatsuji

Skill: Another

Causes target to die in an accident.

I remember being like, *“What the...? That sounds way too powerful. So he’s basically invincible? How could you even write a story around that?”*

I learned later that my editor just wrote the first thing that came to mind.

*Eh. Whatever,* I thought. *It sounds cool, but it’s not like I’m going to have to create a story around this character anyway.*

Four months went by, and thankfully, I was lucky enough to release a third volume of the *Bungo Stray Dogs* manga. This time, Natsuhiko Kyougoku wrote a comment to promote the series with Volume 3. I made sure to come up with his character’s background and skill on my own. Incidentally, Natsuhiko Kyougoku himself asked me to make him an elderly villain who had the power to possess people.

An elderly...villain?

I'm sure this goes without saying, but it took a bit of courage to make such an incredibly well-known author like him into a villain. Plus, the way he actually phrased the skill—Possession Drop—made it sound...kind of cool. Like the skill user drop-kicked the enemies to save his friends or something. Anyway, I was having trouble figuring out how to use it. However, after a lot of worrying and anguish, I came up with a simple solution.

Skill: Possession Drop

Drops evil spirits onto opponents to possess them.

What do you think? Dropping spirits onto an opponent is much cooler than drop-kicking spirits, right? It's kinda like the TV show *Ikkyu-san*.

At any rate, this character's background was also published in *Young Ace*. While I was checking out the incredible design, I remember thinking, *Whatever. At least, I'll never have to write a story around it.*

Some more time went by, and those two very cool character designs ended up in bookstore posters and ads and handouts. They seemed to be growing more popular by the day, which I was, of course, grateful for. I had so many people getting in touch with me just to say that they saw the characters somewhere.

But one day, my editor told me, *"I often get questions from bookstore clerks asking if there's ever going to be a story about these two."*

*Ha-ha-ha*, I thought. *Ha-ha-ha. How funny.*

It ended up not being a joke, though. At all. The next thing I knew, the characters were in another magazine. I occasionally wonder if my editor's quick thinking is some sort of supernatural skill.

*Now what?*

I get that it might look like I hated writing this at the time, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

It was just a ton of pressure. After all, Yukito Ayatsuji and Natsuhiko Kyougoku are two of Japan's greatest mystery writers. The cream of the crop. So I knew



that once I wrote this novel...both of them were going to have to check it themselves before it went to print.

I wanted to die. I wanted to disappear. I wanted to crawl into a hole.

However, that was when the greatest miracle of all occurred—in the form of Naoki Award-winning author, Mizuki Tsujimura. Despite her youth, she's an extremely popular mystery writer with just as much talent as Ayatsuji and Kyougoku, and guess what? She happened to be a fan of *Bungo Stray Dogs* and asked if she could be in the story, too!

I was in awe, to say the least.

Now I had to do this. I had three incredible authors on my side, all without any effort of my own. The whole thing just fell into my lap. Time wanted this to happen, and nothing makes an author happier than having a story pop up out of nowhere as if it wants to be written.

I had to do it. I wanted to do it.

As I'm sure everyone noticed, Agent Tsujimura has an extremely important role in the book. She is the core of the story. If the author herself never offered to be a part of it, then this would have been a completely different (and worse) novel.

No matter how you put it, this was nothing short of a miracle.

Perhaps my mind was personally blessed as well. Or maybe the pressure worked for me in a good way? Regardless, these three incredible authors gave me their stamps of approval after reading *Yukito Ayatsuji vs. Natsuhiko Kyougoku*. It ended up being well received by the readers, too.

Yukito Ayatsuji said to me, *"Before I read the novel, I was worried. I thought, 'What if it ends up being really bad?' But it was really, really good."* I was so incredibly grateful to receive a comment that encouraging (and potentially spine-tingling depending on how you interpret it).

The birth of a new story is a true miracle. Not even the author can pinpoint exactly where their story came from, and yet once it arrives, it becomes a unique world of its own that leaves a lasting impression on all who read it.

I am grateful for every kind of miracle. I am grateful for the publishers, distributors, and bookstores—and most of all, I am grateful to the authors Ayatsuji, Kyougoku, and Tsujimura for allowing a rookie author such as myself to write this novel.

Let us meet again after the next miracle.

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